



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

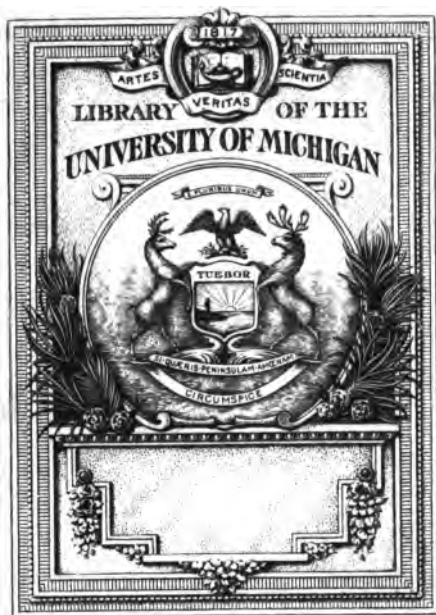
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



From the Library of
Sigmund K. Proctor

Sigmund R. Proctor

828

R5223t

Detroit
May 1, 1916

PILGRIMAGE
BACKWATER

PILGRIMAGE

By Dorothy M. Richardson

A series of novels, each complete in itself, telling in a new way the story of the adventures of Miriam.

Miss May Sinclair writing in *The Egoist* says: "To me these novels show an art and method and form carried to punctilious perfection."

Four volumes are ready:

POINTED ROOFS
BACKWATER
HONEYCOMB
THE TUNNEL

A fifth is in preparation:

INTERIM

PILGRIMAGE

BACKWATER

BY DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON



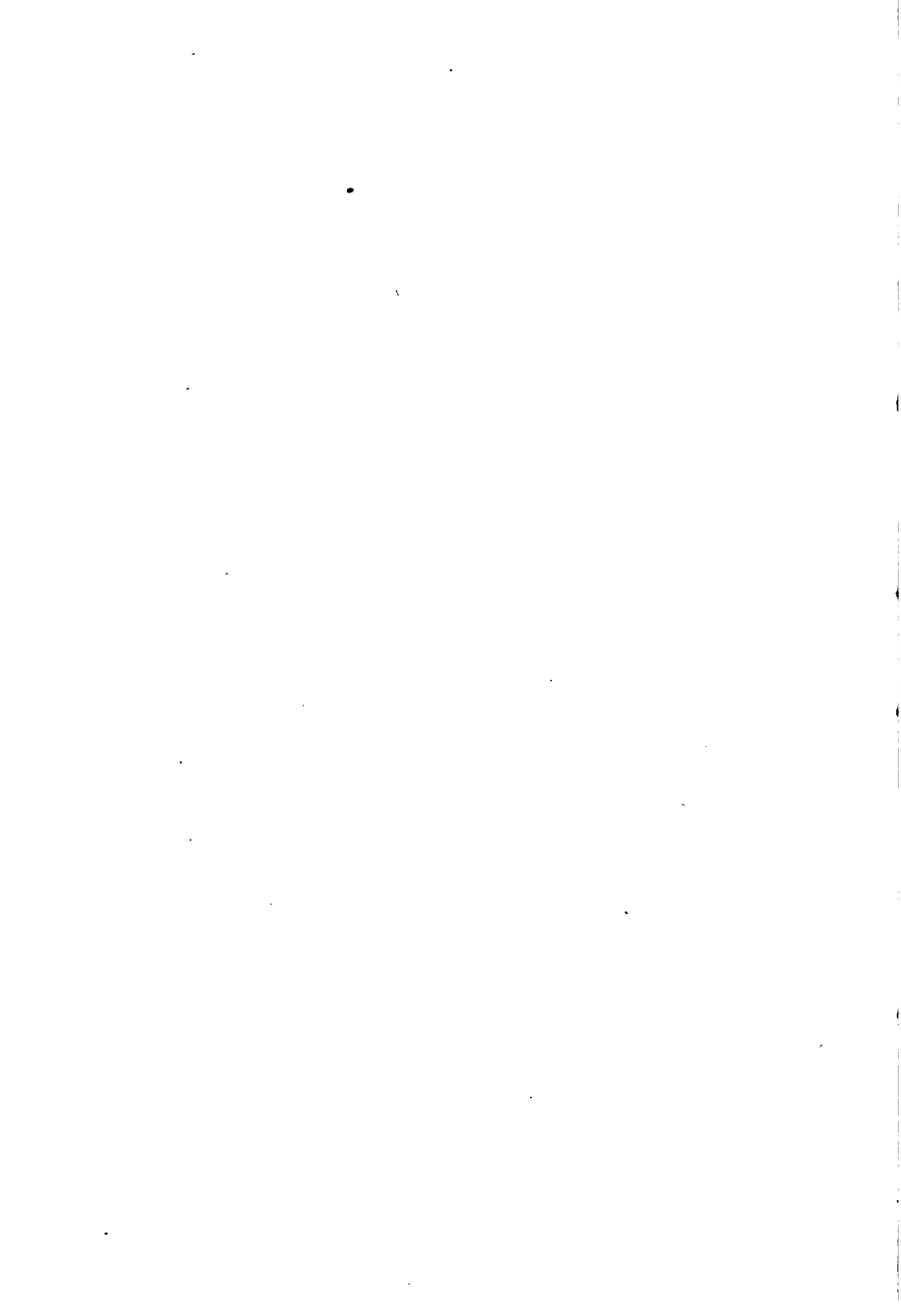
NEW YORK · ALFRED · A · KNOPF · MCMXIX

**COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY
ALFRED A. KNOPF, Inc.**



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
J. A. H.



Library of
Sigmund A. Proctor
3-12-42

CHAPTER I

1

A SWARTHY turbaned face shone at Miriam from a tapestry screen standing between her and the ferns rising from a basket framework in the bow of the window. Consulting it at intervals as the afternoon wore on, she found that it made very light of the quiet propositions that were being elaborated within hearing of her inattentive ears. Looking beyond it she could catch glimpses between the crowded fernery, when a tram was not jingling by, of a close-set palisade just across the roadway and beyond the palisade of a green level ending at a row of Spanish poplars. The trams seemed very near and noisy. When they passed by the window, the speakers had to raise their voices. Otherwise the little drawing-room was very quiet, with a strange old-fashioned quietness. It was full of old things, like the Gobelin screen, and old thoughts like the thoughts of the ladies who were sitting

PILGRIMAGE

and talking there. She and her mother had seemed quite modern, fussy, worldly people when they had first come into the room. From the moment the three ladies had come in and begun talking to her mother, the things in the room, and the view of the distant row of poplars had grown more and more peaceful, and now at the end of an hour she felt that she, and to some extent Mrs. Henderson too, belonged to the old-world room with its quiet green outlook shut in by the poplars. Only the trams were disturbing. They came busily by, with their strange jingle-jingle, plock-plock, and made her inattentive. Why were there so many people coming by in trams? Where were they going? Why were all the trams painted that hard, dingy blue?

The sisters talked quietly, outlining their needs in smooth gentle voices, in small broken phrases, frequently interrupting and correcting each other. Miriam heard dreamily that they wanted help with the lower school, the children from six to eight years of age, in the mornings and afternoons, and in the evenings a general superintendence of the four boarders. They kept on saying that the work was very easy and simple; there were no naughty girls—hardly a single naughty girl—in

BACKWATER

the school; there should be no difficult superintendence, no exercise of authority would be required.

By the time they had reached the statement of these modifications Miriam felt that she knew them quite well. The shortest, who did most of the talking and who had twinkling eyes and crooked pince-nez and soft reddish cheeks and a little red-tipped nose, and whose small coil of sheeny grey hair was pinned askew on the top of her head—stray loops standing out at curious angles—was Miss Jenny, the middle one. The very tall one sitting opposite her, with a delicate wrinkled creamy face and coal-black eyes and a peak of ringletted smooth coal-black hair, was the eldest, Miss Deborah. The other sister, much younger, with neat smooth green-grey hair and a long sad greyish face and faded eyes, was Miss Haddie. They were all three dressed in thin fine black material and had tiny hands and little softly moving feet. What did they think of the trams?

"Do you think you could manage it, chickie?" said Mrs. Henderson suddenly.

"I think I could."

"No doubt, my dear, oh, no doubt," said Miss

PILGRIMAGE

Jenny with a little sound of laughter as she tapped her knee with the pince-nez she had plucked from their rakish perch on the reddened bridge of her nose.

"I don't think I could teach Scripture."

An outbreak of incoherent little sounds and statements from all three taught her that Miss Deborah took the Bible classes of the whole school.

"How old is Miriam?"

"Just eighteen. She has put up her hair to-day."

"Oh, poor child, she need not have done that."

"She is a *born* teacher. She used to hold little classes amongst her schoolfellows when she was only eight years old."

Miriam turned sharply to her mother. She was sitting with her tired look—bright eyes, and moist flushed face. How had she heard about the little classes? Had there been little classes? She could not remember them.

"She speaks French like a Parisienne."

That was that silly remark made by the woman in the train coming home from Hanover.

"Eh—we thought it—it was in Germany she was——"

BACKWATER

"Yes, but I learned more French."

The sisters smiled provisionally.

"She shared a room with the mademoiselle."

"Oh—er—hee—hay—perhaps she might speak French with the gels."

"Oh, no, I couldn't *speak*."

There was a tender little laugh.

"I don't know French conversation."

"Well, well."

The sisters brought the discussion to an end by offering twenty pounds a year in return for Miriam's services, and naming the date of the beginning of the autumn term.

2

On the way to the front door they all looked into the principal schoolroom. Miriam saw a long wide dining-room table covered with brown American cloth. Shelves neatly crowded with books lined one wall from floor to ceiling. Opposite them at the far end of the room was a heavy green marble clock frame. At its centre a gold-faced clock ticked softly. Opposite the windows were two shallow alcoves. In one stood a shrouded blackboard on an easel. The other held a piano with a high slender back. The prancing

PILGRIMAGE

outward sweep of its lid gave Miriam the impression of an afternoon dress.

Miss Deborah drew up one of the Venetian blinds. They all crowded to the window and looked out on a small garden backed by trees and lying in deep shadow. Beyond were more gardens and the brownish backs of small old brick houses. Low walls separated the school garden from the gardens on either side.

"On our right we have a school for the deaf and dumb," said Miss Perne; "on the other side is a family of Polish Jews."

3

"Mother, why *did* you pile it on?"

They would soon be down at the corner of Banbury Park where the tram lines ended and the Favorite omnibuses were standing in the muddy road under the shadow of the railway bridge. Through the jingling of the trams, the dop-dop of the hoofs of the tram-horses and the noise of a screaming train thundering over the bridge, Miriam made her voice heard, gazing through the spotted veil at her mother's quivering features.

BACKWATER

"They might have made me do all sorts of things I can't do."

Mrs. Henderson's voice, breathless with walking, made a little sound of protest, a narrowed sound that told Miriam her amusement was half annoyance. The dark, noisy bridge, the clatter and rattle and the mud through which she must plunge to an omnibus exasperated her to the limit of her endurance.

"I'd got the post," she said angrily; "you could see it was all settled and then you went saying those things."

Glancing at the thin shrouded features she saw the faint lift of her mother's eyebrows and the firmly speechless mouth.

"Piccadilly—jump on, chickie."

"Let's go outside now it's fine," said Miriam crossly.

Reaching the top of the omnibus she hurried to the front seat on the left hand side.

"That's a very windy spot."

"No it isn't, it's quite hot. The sun's come out now. It's rained for weeks. It won't rain any more. It'll be hot. You won't feel the wind. Will you have the corner, mother?"

"No, chick, you sit there."

PILGRIMAGE

Miriam screwed herself into the corner seat, crossing her knees and grazing the tips of her shoes.

"This is the only place on the top of a bus."

Mrs. Henderson sat down at her side.

"I always make Harriett come up here when we go up to the West End."

"Of course it's the only place," she insisted in response to her mother's amused laugh. "No one smoking or talking in front; you can see out in front and you can see the shops if there are any, and you're not falling off all the time. The bus goes on the left side of the road and tilts to the left."

The seats were filling up and the driver appeared clambering into his place.

"Didn't you ever think of that? Didn't you ever think of the bus tilting that way?" persisted Miriam to her mother's inattentive face. "Fancy never thinking of it. It's beastly on the other side."

The omnibus jerked forward.

"You ought to be a man, Mimmy."

"I liked that little short one," said Miriam contentedly as they came from under the roar of the bridge. "They were awfully nice, weren't

BACKWATER

they? They seemed to have made up their mind to take me before we went. . . . So I think they like us. I wonder why they like us. Didn't you think they liked us? Don't you think they are awfully nice?"

"I do. They are very charming ladies."

"Yes, but wasn't it awfully rum their liking us in that funny way?"

"I'm sure I don't see why they should not."

"Oh, mother, you know what I mean. I like them. I'm perfectly sure I shall like them. D'you remember the little one saying all girls ought to marry? Why did she say that?"

"They are dear funny little O.M.'s," said Mrs. Henderson merrily. She was sitting with her knees crossed, the stuff of her brown canvas dress was dragged across them into an ugly fold by the weight of the velvet panel at the side of the skirt. She looked very small and resourceless. And there were the Pernes with their house and their school. They were old maids. Of course. What then?

"I never dreamed of getting such a big salary."

"Oh, my chickie, I'm afraid it isn't much."

"It is, mother, it's lovely."

"Oh—ch—well."

PILGRIMAGE

Miriam turned fiercely to the roadway on her left.

4

She had missed the first swing forward of the vehicle and the first movements of the compact street.

They were going ahead now at a steady even trot. Her face was bathed in the flow of the breeze.

Little rivulets played about her temples, feeling their way through her hair. She drew off her gloves without turning from the flowing roadway. As they went on and on down the long road Miriam forgot her companion in the tranquil sense of being carried securely forward through the air away from people and problems. Ahead of her, at the end of the long drive, lay three sunlit weeks, bright now in the certainty of the shadow that lay beyond them . . . "the junior school" . . . "four boarders."

5

They lumbered at last round a corner and out into a wide thoroughfare, drawing up outside a newly-built public-house. Above it rose row

BACKWATER

upon row of upper windows sunk in masses of ornamental terra-cotta-coloured plaster. Branch roads, laid with tram lines led off in every direction. Miriam's eyes followed a dull blue tram with a grubby white-painted seatless roof jingling busily off up a roadway where short trees stood all the way along in the small dim gardens of little grey houses. On the near corner of the road stood a wide white building, bulging into heavy domes against the sky. Across its side, large gilt letters standing far apart spelled out "Banbury Empire."

"It must be a theatre," she told herself in astonishment. "That's what they call a suburban theatre. People think it is really a theatre."

The little shock sent her mind feeling out along the road they had just left. She considered its unbroken length, its shops, its treelessness. The wide thoroughfare, up which they now began to rumble, repeated it on a larger scale. The pavements were wide causeways reached from the roadway by stone steps, three deep. The people passing along them were unlike any she knew. There were no ladies, no gentlemen, no girls or young men such as she knew. They were all alike. They were . . . She could find no word for the

PILGRIMAGE

strange impression they made. It coloured the whole of the district through which they had come. It was part of the new world to which she was pledged to go on September 18th. It was her world already; and she had no words for it. She would not be able to convey it to others. She felt sure her mother had not noticed it. She must deal with it alone. To try to speak about it, even with Eve, would sap her courage. It was her secret. A strange secret for all her life as Hanover had been. But Hanover was beautiful, with distant country through the saal windows with its colours misty in the sunlight, the beautiful, happy town and the woodland villages so near. This new secret was shabby, ugly and shabby. The half-perceived something persisted unchanged when the causeways and shops disappeared and long rows of houses streamed by, their close ranks broken only by an occasional cross road. They were large, high, flat-fronted houses with flights of grey stone steps leading to their porchless doors. They had tiny railed-in front gardens crowded with shrubs. Here and there long narrow strips of garden pushed a row of houses back from the roadway. In these longer plots stood signboards and show-cases. "Photo-

BACKWATER

graphic Studio," "Commercial College," "Eye Treatment," "Academy of Dancing." . . . She read the announcements with growing disquietude.

Rows of shops reappeared and densely crowded pavements, and then more high straight houses.

6

She roused herself at last from her puzzled contemplation and turned to glance at her mother. Mrs. Henderson was looking out ahead. The exhausted face was ready, Miriam saw, with its faintly questioning eyebrows and tightly-held lips, for emotional response. She turned away uneasily to the spellbound streets.

"Useless to try to talk about anything. . . . Mother would be somehow violent. She would be overpowering. The strange new impressions would be dissolved."

But she must do something, show some sign of companionship. She began humming softly. The air was so full of clamour that she could not hear her voice. The houses and shops had disappeared. Drab brick walls were passing slowly by on either side. A goods' yard. She deepened her humming, accentuating her phrases so that the sound might reach her companion through

PILGRIMAGE

the reverberations of the clangour of shunting trains.

7

The high brick walls were drawing away. The end of the long roadway was in sight. Its widening mouth offered no sign of escape from the disquieting strangeness. The open stretch of thoroughfare into which they emerged was fed by innumerable lanes of traffic. From the islands dotted over its surface towered huge lamp standards branching out thin arms. As they rattled noisily over the stone setts they jolted across several lines of tramway and wove their way through currents of traffic crossing each other in all directions.

"I wonder where we're going—I wonder if this is a Piccadilly bus," Miriam thought of saying. Impossible to shout through the din.

8

The driver gathered up his horses and they clattered deafeningly over the last open stretch and turned into a smooth wide prospect.

"Oh bliss, wood-paving," murmured Miriam.

A mass of smoke-greyed, sharply steepled stone

BACKWATER

building appeared on the right. Her eyes rested on its soft shadows.

On the left a tall grey church was coming towards them, spindling up into the sky. It sailed by, showing Miriam a circle of little stone pillars built into its spire. Plummy trees streamed by, standing large and separate on moss-green grass railed from the roadway. Bright white-faced houses with pillared porches shone through from behind them and blazed white above them against the blue sky. Wide side-streets opened showing high balconied houses. The side streets were feathered with trees and ended mistily.

Away ahead were edges of clean bright masonry in profile, soft tufted heads of trees, bright green in the clear light. At the end of the vista the air was like pure saffron-tinted mother-of-pearl.

Miriam sat back and drew a deep breath.

9

"Well, chickie?"

"What's the matter?"

"Why, you've been very funny!"

"How?"

"You've been so dummel."

"No, I haven't."

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh—ch."

"How d'you mean I've been funny?"

"Not speaking to poor old mum-jam."

"Well, you haven't spoken to me."

"No."

"I shan't take any of my summer things there," said Miriam.

Mrs. Henderson's face twitched.

"Shall I?"

"I'm afraid you haven't very much in the way of thick clothing."

"I've only got my plaid dress for every day and my mixy grey for best and my dark blue summer skirt. My velveteen skirt and my nain-sook blouse are too old."

"You can wear the dark blue muslin blouse with the blue skirt for a long time yet with something warm underneath."

"My grey's very grubby."

"You look very well in it indeed."

"I don't mean that. I mean it's all gone sort of dull and grubby over the surface when you look down it."

"Oh, that's your imagination."

"It isn't my imagination and I can see how Harriett's looks."

BACKWATER

"You both look very nice."

"That's not the point."

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill, my chick."

"I'm not making anything. The simple fact is that the grey dresses are piggy."

Mrs. Henderson flushed deeply, twining and untwining her silk-gloved fingers.

"She thinks that's 'gross exaggeration.' That's what she wants to say," pondered Miriam wearily.

They turned into Langham Place.

She glanced to see whether her mother realised where they were.

"Look, we're in the West End, mother! Oh, I'm not going to think about Banbury Park till it begins!"

10

They drew up near the Maison Nouvelle.

"*Stanlake* is," said a refined emphatic voice from the pavement.

Miriam did not look for the speaker. The quality of the voice brought her a moment's realisation of the meaning of her afternoon's adventure. She was going to be shut up away from the grown-up things, the sunlit world, and the people who were enjoying it. She would be shut

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh—eh."

"How d'you mean I've been funny?"

"Not speaking to poor old mum-jam."

"Well, you haven't spoken to me."

"No."

"I shan't take any of my summer things there,"
said Miriam.

Mrs. Henderson's face twitched.

"Shall I?"

"I'm afraid you haven't very much in the way
of thick clothing."

"I've only got my plaid dress for every day
and my mixy grey for best and my dark blue
summer skirt. My velveteen skirt and my nain-
sook blouse are too old."

"You can wear the dark blue muslin blouse
with the blue skirt for a long time yet with some-
thing warm underneath."

"My grey's very grubby."

"You look very well in it indeed."

"I don't mean that. I mean it's all gone sort
of dull and grubby over the surface when you
look down it."

"Oh, that's your imagination."

"It isn't my imagination and I can see how
Harriett's looks."

BACKWATER

"You both look very nice."

"That's not the point."

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill, my chick."

"I'm not making anything. The simple fact is that the grey dresses are piggy."

Mrs. Henderson flushed deeply, twining and untwining her silk-gloved fingers.

"She thinks that's 'gross exaggeration.' That's what she wants to say," pondered Miriam wearily.

They turned into Langham Place.

She glanced to see whether her mother realised where they were.

"Look, we're in the West End, mother! Oh, I'm not going to think about Banbury Park till it begins!"

10

They drew up near the Maison Nouvelle.

"*Stanlake* is," said a refined emphatic voice from the pavement.

Miriam did not look for the speaker. The quality of the voice brought her a moment's realisation of the meaning of her afternoon's adventure. She was going to be shut up away from the grown-up things, the sunlit world, and the people who were enjoying it. She would be shut

PILGRIMAGE

up and surrounded in Wordsworth House, a proper schooly school, amongst all those strange roadways. It would be cold English pianos and dreadful English children—and trams going up and down that grey road outside.

As they went on down Regent Street she fastened, for refuge from her thoughts, upon a window where softly falling dresses of dull olive stood about against a draped background of pale dead yellow. She held it in her mind as shop after shop streamed by.

"These shops are extremely *récherché*."

"It's old Regent Street, mother," said Miriam argumentatively. "Glorious old Regent Street. Ruby wine."

"Ah, Regent Street."

"We always walk up one side and down the other. Up the dolls' hospital side and down Liberty's. Glory, glory, ruby wine."

"You *are* enthusiastic."

"But it's so glorious. Don't you think so?"

"Sit back a little, chickie. One can't see the windows. You're such a solid young woman."

"You'll see our A B C soon. You know. The one we go to after the Saturday pops. You've been to it. You came to it the day we came to

BACKWATER

Madame Schumann's farewell. It's just round here in Piccadilly. Here it is. Glorious. I must make the others come up once more before I die. I always have a scone. I don't like the aryated bread. We go along the Burlington Arcade too. I don't believe you've ever been along there. It's simply perfect. Glove shops and fans and a smell of the most exquisite scent everywhere."

"Dear me. It must be very captivating."

"Now we shall pass the parks. Oh, isn't the sun A1 copper bottom!"

Mrs. Henderson laughed wistfully.

"What delicious shade under those fine old trees. I almost wish I had brought my *en-tout-cas*."

"Oh no, you don't really want it. There will be more breeze presently. The bus always begins to go quicker along here. It's the Green Park, that one. Those are clubs that side, the West End clubs. It's fascinating all the way along here to Hyde Park Corner. You just see Park Lane going up at the side. Park Lane. It goes wiggling away, straight into heaven. We've never been up there. I always read the name at the corner."

PILGRIMAGE

"You ridiculous chick—ah, there is the Royal Academy of Arts."

"Oh yes, I wonder if there are any Leightons this year."

"Or Leader. Charles Leader. I think there is nothing more charming than those landscape scenes by Leader."

"I've got three bally weeks. I can see Hyde Park. We've got ages yet. It goes on being fascinating right down through Kensington and right on up to the other side of Putney Bridge."

"Dear me. Isn't it fascinating after that?"

"Oh, not all that awful walk along the Upper Richmond Road—not until our avenue begins—"

11

Miriam fumbled with the fastening of the low wide gate as her mother passed on up the drive. She waited until the footsteps were muffled by the fullness of the may trees linking their middle branches over the bend in the drive. Then she looked steadily down the sunflecked asphalted avenue along which they had just come. The level sunlight streamed along the empty roadway and the shadows of the lime trees lay across the path and up the oak palings. Her eyes travelled

BACKWATER

up and down the boles of the trees, stopping at each little stunted tuft of greenery. She could no longer hear her mother's footsteps. There was a scented coolness in the shady watered garden. Leaning gently with her breast against the upper bars of the gate she broke away from the sense of her newly-made engagement.

She scanned the whole length of the shrouded avenue from end to end and at last looked freely up amongst the interwoven lime trees. Long she watched, her eyes roaming from the closely-growing leaves where the green was densest to the edges of the trees where the light shone through. "Gold and green," she whispered, "green and gold, held up by firm brown stems bathed in gold."

When she reached the open garden beyond the bend she ran once round the large centre bed where berberus and laurestinus bushes stood in a clump ringed by violas and blue lobelias and heavily scented masses of cherry-ripe. Taking the shallow steps in two silent strides she reached the shelter of the deep porch. The outer door and the door of the vestibule stood open. Gently closing the vestibule she ran across the paved hall and opened the door on the right.

Harriett, in a long fawn canvas dress with a

PILGRIMAGE

deep silk sash, was standing in the middle of the drawing-room floor with a large pot of scented geraniums in her arms.

12

"Hullo!" said Miriam.

Putting down her pot Harriett fixed brown eyes upon her and began jumping lightly up and down where she stood. The small tips of her fawn glacé kid shoes shone together between the hem of her dress and the pale green of the carpet.

"What you doing?" said Miriam, quietly shutting the door behind her and flushing with pleasure.

Harriett hopped more energetically. The blaze from the western window caught the paste stone in the tortoise-shell comb crowning her little high twist of hair and the prisms of the lustres standing behind her on the white marble mantel-piece.

"What you doing, booby?"

"Old conservatory," panted Harriett.

Miriam looked vaguely down the length of the long room to where the conservatory doors stood wide open. As she gazed at the wet tiling Har-

BACKWATER

riett ceased hopping and kicked her delicately.
"Well, gooby?"

Miriam grinned.

"You've got it. I knew you would. The Misses Perne have engaged Miss Miriam Henderson as resident teacher for the junior school."

"Oh yes, I've got it," smiled Miriam. "But don't let's talk about that. It's just an old school, a house. I don't know a bit what it'll be like. I've got three bally blooming weeks. Don't let's talk about it."

"Awri."

"What about Saturday?"

"It's all right. Ted was at the club."

"Was he!"

"Yes, old scarlet face, he were."

"I'm *not*."

"He came in just before closing time and straight up to me and ast where you were. He looked sick when I told him, and so fagged."

"It was awfully hot in town," murmured Miriam tenderly.

She went to the piano and struck a note very softly.

"He played a single with the duffer and lost it."

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh, well, of course, he was so tired."

"Yes, but it wasn't that. It was because you weren't there. He's simply no good when you're not there, now. He's perfectly different."

Miriam struck her note again.

"Listen, that's E flat."

"Go on."

"That's a chord in E flat. Isn't it lovely? It sounds perfectly different in C. Listen. Isn't it funny?"

"Well, don't you want to know why it's all right about Saturday?"

"Yes, screamingly."

"Well, that's the perfectly flabbergasting thing. Ted simply came to say they've got a man coming to stay with them and can he bring him."

"My dear! What a heavenly relief. That makes twelve men and fourteen girls. That'll do."

"Nan Babington's hurt her ankle, but she swears she's coming." Harriett sniffed and sank down on the white sheepskin, drawing her knees up to her chin.

"You shouldn't say 'swears.'"

"Well, you bet. She simply loves our dances."

BACKWATER

"Did she say she did?"

"She sat on the pavilion seat with Bevan Seymour all the afternoon and I was with them when Ted was playing with the duffer. She told Bevan that she didn't know anywhere else where the kids arranged the dances, and everything was so jolly. It's *screaming*, my dear, she said."

"It's horrid the way she calls him 'my dear.' Your ring is simply dazzling like that, Harry. D'you see? It's the sun."

"Of course it'll mean she'll sit out in a deck chair in the garden with Bevan all the time."

"How disgusting."

"It's her turn for the pavilion tea on Saturday. She's coming in her white muslin and then coming straight on here with two sticks and wants us to keep her some flowers. Let's go and have tea. It'll be nearly dinner time."

"Has Mary made a cake?"

"I dunno. Tea was to be in the breakfast-room when you came back."

"Why not in the conservatory?"

"Because, you silly old crow, I'm beranging it for Saturday."

"Shall we have the piano in there?"

PILGRIMAGE

"Well, don't you think so?"

"Twenty-six of us. Perhaps it'll be more blissful."

"If we have the breakfast-room piano in the hall it'll bung up the hall."

"Yes, but the Erard bass is so perfect for waltzes."

"And the be-rillicant Collard treble is so all right in the vatoire."

"I thought it was Eve and I talked about the Collard treble."

"Well, I was there."

"Anyhow we'll have the grand in the conservatory. Oh, Bacchus! Ta-ra-ra-boom-deay."

"Tea," said a rounded voice near the keyhole.

"Eve!" shouted Miriam.

The door opened slightly. "I know," said the voice.

"Come *in*, Eve," commanded Miriam, trying to swing the door wide.

"I know," said the voice, quivering with the effort of holding the door. "I know all about the new Misses Perne and the new man—Max Sonnenheim—Max."

"This way out," called Harriett from the conservatory.

BACKWATER

"Eve," pleaded Miriam, tugging at the door, "let me get at you. Don't be an idiot."

A gurgle of amusement made her loosen her hold.

"I'm not trying, you beast. Take your iron wrists away."

A small white hand waggled fingers through the aperture.

Miriam seized and covered it. "Come in for a minute," she begged. "I want to see you. What have you got on?"

"Tea."

The hand twisted itself free and Eve fled through the hall.

Miriam flung after her with a yell and caught at her slender body. "I've a great mind to drag down your old hair."

"Tea," smiled Eve serenely.

"All *right*, I'm coming, damn you, aren't I?"

"Oh, Mimmy!"

"Well, damn *me*, then. Somebody in the house must swear. I say, Eve?"

"What?"

"Nothing, only I *say*."

"Um."

CHAPTER II

1

MIRIAM extended herself on the drawing-room sofa which had been drawn up at the end of the room under the open window.

The quintets of candles on the girandoles hanging on either side of the high overmantel gave out an unflickering radiance, and in the centre of the large room the chandelier, pulled low, held out in all directions bulbs of softly tinted light.

In an intensity of rose-shaded brilliance pouring from a tall standard lamp across the sheep-skin hearthrug stood a guest with a fiddle under her arm fluttering pages on a music stand. The family sat-grouped towards her in a circle.

On her low sofa, outside the more brilliant light, Miriam was a retreating loop in the circle of seated forms, all visible as she lay with her eyes on the ceiling. But no eyes could meet and pilfer her own. The darkness brimmed in from

BACKWATER

the window on her right. She could touch the rose-leaves on the sill and listen to the dewy stillness of the garden.

"What shall I play?" said the guest.

"What have you there?"

"Gluck . . . Klassische Stucke . . . Cavatina."

"Ah, Gluck," said Mr. Henderson, smoothing his long knees with outspread fingers.

"Have you got that Beethoven thing?" asked Sarah.

"Not here, Sally."

"I saw it—on the piano—with chords," said Sarah excitedly.

"Chords," encouraged Miriam.

"Yes, I think so," muttered Sarah, taking up her crochet. "I daresay I'm wrong," she giggled, throwing out a foot and hastily withdrawing it.

"I can find it, dear," chanted the guest.

Miriam raised a flourishing hand. The crimsoned oval of Eve's face appeared inverted above her own. She poked a finger into one of the dark eyes and looking at the screwed-up lid whispered voicelessly, "Make her play the Romance first and *then* the Cavatina without talking in between. . . .

Eve's large soft mouth pursed a little, and

PILGRIMAGE

Miriam watched steadily until dimples appeared. "Go on, Eve," she said, removing her hand.

"Shall I play the Beethoven first?" enquired the guest.

"Mm—and then the Cavatina," murmured Miriam, as if half asleep, turning wholly towards the garden, as Eve went to collect the piano scores.

2

She seemed to grow larger and stronger and easier as the thoughtful chords came musing out into the night and hovered amongst the dark trees. She found herself drawing easy breaths and relaxing completely against the support of the hard friendly sofa. How quietly everyone was listening. . . .

After a while, everything was dissolved, past and future and present, and she was nothing but an ear, intent on the meditative harmony which stole out into the garden.

3

When the last gently strung notes had ceased she turned from her window and found Harriett's near eye fixed upon her, the eyebrow travelling slowly up the forehead.

BACKWATER

"Wow," mouthed Miriam.

Harriett screwed her mouth to one side and strained her eyebrow higher.

The piano introduction to the Cavatina drowned the comments on the guest's playing and the family relaxed once more into listening.

"Pink anemones, eh," suggested Miriam softly.

Harriett drew in her chin and nodded approvingly.

"Pink anemones," sighed Miriam, and turned to watch Margaret Wedderburn standing in her full-skirted white dress on the hearthrug in a radiance of red and golden light. Her heavily waving fair hair fell back towards its tightly braided basket of plaits from a face as serene as death. From between furry eyelashes her eyes looked steadfastly out, robbed of their everyday sentimental expression.

As she gazed at the broad white forehead, the fine gold down covering the cheeks and upper lip, and traced the outline of the heavy chin and firm large mouth and the steady arm that swept out in rich 'cello-like notes the devout theme of the lyric, Miriam drifted to an extremity of happiness.

PILGRIMAGE

4

. . . To-morrow the room would be lit and decked and clear. Amongst the crowd of guests, he would come across the room, walking in his way. . . . She smiled to herself. He would come "sloping in" in his way, like a shadow, not looking at anyone. His strange friend would be with him. There would be introductions and greetings. Then he would dance with her silently and not looking at her, as if they were strangers, and then be dancing with someone else . . . with smiling, mocking, tender brown eyes and talking and answering and all the time looking about the room. And then again with her, cool and silent and not looking. And presently she would tell him about going away to Banbury Park.

5

Perhaps he would look wretched and miserable again as he had done when they were alone by the piano the Sunday before she went to Germany. . . . "Play 'Abide with me,' Miriam; play 'Abide with me.' " . . .

To-morrow there would be another moment like that. He would say her name suddenly, as

BACKWATER

he had done last week at the Babingtons' dance, very low, half-turning towards her. She would be ready this time and say his name and move instead of being turned to stone. Confidently the music assured her of that moment.

6

She lay looking quietly into his imagined face till the room had gone. Then the face grew dim and far off and at last receded altogether into darkness. That darkness was dreadful. It was his own life. She would never know it. However well they got to know each other they would always be strangers. Probably he never thought about her when he was alone. Only of Shakespeare and politics. What would he think if he knew she thought of him? But he thought of her when he saw her. That was utterly certain; the one thing certain in the world. . . . That day, coming along Putney Hill with mother, tired and dull and trying to keep her temper, passing his house, seeing him standing at his window, alone and pale and serious. The sudden lightening of his face surprised her again, violently, as she recalled it. It had lit up the whole world from end to end. He did not know that he had looked

PILGRIMAGE

like that. She had turned swiftly from the sudden knowledge coming like a blow on her heart, that one day he would kiss her. Not for years and years. But one day he would bend his head. She wrenched herself from the thought, but it was too late. She thanked heaven she had looked; she wished she had not; the kiss had come; she would forget it; it had not touched her, it was like the breath of the summer. Everything had wavered; her feet had not felt the pavement. She remembered walking on, exulting with hanging head, cringing close to the ivy which hung from the top of the garden wall, sorry and pitiful towards her mother, and everyone who would never stand first with Ted.

7

. . . There were girls who let themselves be kissed for fun. . . . Playing "Kiss in the Ring," being kissed by someone they did not mean to always be with, all their life . . . how sad and dreadful. Why did it not break their hearts?

8

Meg Wedderburn was smiling on her hearthrug, being thanked and praised. Her brown violin hung amongst the folds of her skirt.

BACKWATER

"People *do* like us," mused Miriam, listening to the peculiar sympathy of the family voice.

Meg was there, away from her own home, happy with them, the front door shut, their garden and house all round her and her strange luggage upstairs in one of the spare rooms. Nice Meg. . . .

9

After breakfast the next morning Miriam sat in a low carpet chair at a window in the long bedroom she shared with Harriett. It was a morning of blazing sunlight and bright blue. She had just come up through the cool house from a rose-gathering tour of the garden with Harriett. A little bunch of pink anemones she had picked for herself were set in a tumbler on the wash-hand-stand.

She had left the door open to hear coming faintly up from the far-away drawing-room the tap-tap of hammering that told her Sarah and Eve were stretching the drugget.

On her knee lay her father's cigarette-making machine and a parcel of papers and tobacco. An empty cigarette tin stood upon the window-sill.

She began packing tobacco into the groove of

PILGRIMAGE

the machine, distributing and pressing it lightly with the tips of her fingers, watching as she worked the heavy pink cups of the anemones and the shining of their green stalks through the water. They were, she reflected, a little too much out. In the sun they would have come out still more. They would close up at night unless the rooms grew very hot. Slipping the paper evenly into the slot she shut the machine and turned the roller. As the sound of the loosely working cogs came up to her she revolted from her self-imposed task. She was too happy to make cigarettes. It would use up her happiness too stupidly.

She was surprised by a sudden suggestion that she should smoke the single cigarette herself. Why not? Why had she never yet smoked one? She glanced at the slowly swinging door. No one would come. She was alone on the top floor. Everyone was downstairs and busy. The finished cigarette lay on her knee. Taking it between her fingers she pressed a little hanging thread of tobacco into place. The cigarette felt pleasantly plump and firm. It was well made. As she rose to get matches the mowing machine sounded suddenly from the front lawn. She started and looked out of the window, concealing the cigarette

BACKWATER

in her hand. It was the gardener with bent shoulders pushing with all his might. With some difficulty she unhitched the phosphorescent match-box from its place under the gas-bracket and got back into her low chair, invisible from the lawn.

The cool air flowed in garden-scented. She held the cigarette between two fingers. The match hissed and flared as she held it carefully below the sill, and the flame flowed towards her while she set the paper alight. Raising the cigarette to her lips she blew gently outwards, down through the tobacco. The flame twisted and went out, leaving the paper charred. She struck another match angrily, urging herself to draw, and drew little panting breaths with the cigarette well in the flame. It smoked. Blowing out the match she looked at the end of the cigarette. It was glowing all over and a delicate little spiral of smoke rose into her face. Quickly she applied her lips again and drew little breaths, opening her mouth wide between each breath and holding the cigarette sideways away from her. The end glowed afresh with each breath. The paper charred evenly away and little flecks of ash fell about her.

PILGRIMAGE

10

A third of the whole length was consumed. Her nostrils breathed in smoke, and as she tasted the burnt flavour the sweetness of the unpolluted air all around her was a new thing. The acrid tang in her nostrils intoxicated her. She drew more boldly. There was smoke in her mouth. She opened it quickly, sharply exhaling a yellow cloud oddly different from the grey spirals wreathing their way from the end of the cigarette. She went on drawing in mouthful after mouthful of smoke, expelling each quickly with widely-opened lips, turning to look at the well-known room through the yellow haze and again at the sky, which drew nearer as she puffed at it. The sight of the tree-tops scrolled with her little clouds brought her a sense of power. She had chosen to smoke and she was smoking, and the morning world gleamed back at her. . . .

11

The morning gleamed. She would choose her fate. It should be amongst green trees and sunshine. That daunted lump who had accepted the post at Banbury Park had nothing to do with

BACKWATER

her. Morning gladness flooded her, and her gladness of the thought of the evening to come quickened as it had done last night into certainty.

She burned the last inch of the cigarette in the grate, wrapped with combings from the toilet-tidy in a screw of paper. When all was consumed she carefully replaced the summer bundle of ornamental mohair behind the bars.

Useless to tell anyone. No one would believe she had not felt ill. She found it difficult to understand why anyone should feel sick from smoking. Dizzy perhaps . . . a little drunk. Pater's tobacco was very strong, some people could not smoke it. . . . She had smoked a whole cigarette of strong tobacco and liked it. Raising her arms above her head she worked them upwards, stretching every muscle of her body. No, she was anything but ill.

Leaving the window wide she went on to the landing. The smell of tobacco was everywhere. She flung into each room in turn, throwing up windows and leaving doors propped ajar.

Harriett coming up the garden with a basket of cut flowers saw her at the cook's bedroom window.

"What on earth you doing thayer!" she shrieked, putting down her basket.

PILGRIMAGE

Hanging from the window Miriam made a trumpet of her hands.

"Something blew in!"

12

All preparations for the evening were made and the younger members of the household were having a late tea in the breakfast-room. "We've done the alcoves," said Sarah explosively, "in case it rains."

Nan Babington sat up in her long chair to bring her face round to the deep bay where Sarah stood.

"My *dear!* Seraphina! And she's doing the pink bows! *Will* some saint take my cup? Ta. . . . My dear, how *perfectly* screaming."

Miriam raised her head from the petal-scattered table, where she lay prone side by side with Harriett, to watch Nan sitting up in her firm white dress beaming at Sarah through her slanting eye.

"What flowers you going to wear, Nan?"

Nan patted her sleek slightly Japanese-looking hair. "*Ah . . .* splashes of scarlet, my dear. Splashes of scarlet. One in my hair and one here." She patted the broad level of her enviable breast towards the left shoulder.

BACKWATER

"Almost *on* the shoulder, you know—arranged flat, *can't* be squashed and showing as you dance."

"Geraniums! Oom. You've got awfully good taste. What a frightfully good effect. Bright red and bright white. Clean. Go on, Nan."

"*Killing*," pursued Nan. "Tom said at breakfast with his mouth absolutely *full* of sweet-bread, 'it'll rain'—growled, you know, with his mouth *crammed* full. 'Never mind, Tommy,' said Ella with the *utmost* promptitude, 'they're sure to have the alcoves.' 'Oomph,' growled Tommy, pretending not to care. *Naughty* Tommy, naughty, *naughty* Tommy!"

"Any cake left?" sighed Miriam, sinking back amongst her petals and hoping that Nan's voice would go on.

"You girls are the most adorable individuals I ever met. . . . *Did* anybody see Pearlie going home this afternoon?"

Everyone chuckled and waited.

"*My dears! My dears!!* Bevan *dragged* me along to the end of the pavilion to see him enter up the handicaps with his new automatic pen—*awfully* smashing—and I was just hobbling the last few yards past the apple trees when we *saw*

PILGRIMAGE

Pearlie hand-in-hand with the Botterford boys, prancing along the asphalt court—*prancing*, my dears!”

Miriam and Harriett dragged themselves up to see. Nan bridled and swayed from listener to listener, her wide throat gleaming as she sang out her words.

“Prancing—with straggles of grey hair sticking out and that *tiny* sailor hat cocked *almost* on to her nose. My dear, you sh’d’ve *seen* Bevan! He put up his eyeglass, my dears, for a *fraction* of a second,” Nan’s head went up—“Madame Pompadour” thought Miriam—and her slanting eyes glanced down her nose, “and dropped it, clickety-click. You sh’d’ve *seen* the expression on his angelic countenance.”

“I say, she *is* an awful little creature, isn’t she?” said Miriam, watching Eve bend a crimson face over the tea-tray on the hearthrug. “She put her boots on the pavilion table this afternoon when all those men were there—about a mile high they are—with tassels. Why *does* she go on like that?”

“Men like that sort of thing,” said Sarah lightly.

“Sally!”

BACKWATER

"They do. . . . I believe she drinks."

"Sally! My *dear!*"

"I believe she *does*. She's always having shandygaff with the men."

"Oh, well, perhaps she doesn't," murmured Eve.

"Chuck me a lump of sugar, Eve."

Miriam subsided once more amongst the rose petals.

"Bevvy thinks I oughtn't to dance."

"Did he say so?"

"Of course, my dear. But old Wyman said I could, every third, except the Lancers."

"You sh'd've seen Bevvy's face. 'Brother Tommy doesn't object,' I said. 'He's going to look after me!' 'Is he?' said Bevvy in his *most* superior manner."

"What a fearful scrunching you're making," said Harriett, pinching Miriam's nose.

"Let's go and dress," said Miriam, rolling off the table.

13

"How many times has she met him?" asked Miriam as they went through the hall.

"I dunno. Not many."

"I think it's simply hateful."

PILGRIMAGE

"Mimmy!" It was Nan's insinuating voice.

"Coming," called Miriam. "And, you know, Tommy needn't think he can carry on with *Meg* in an alcove."

"*What* would she think? Let's go and tell *Meg* she must dress."

"Mimmy!"

Miriam went back and put her head round the breakfast-room door.

"Let me see you when you're dressed."

"Why?"

"I want to kiss the back of your neck, my dear; love kissing people's necks."

Miriam smiled herself vaguely out of the room, putting away the unpleasant suggestion.

"I wish I'd got a dress like Nan's," she said, joining Harriett in the dark lobby.

"I say, somebody's been using the 'Financial Times' to cut up flowers on. It's all wet." Harriett lifted the limp newspaper from the marble-topped coil of pipes and shook it.

"Hang it up somewhere."

"Where? Everything's cleared up."

"Stick it out of the lavatory window and pull the window down on it."

"Awri, you hold the door open."

BACKWATER

Miriam laughed as Harriett fell into the room.

"Blooming boot-Jack."

"Is it all right in there? Are all the pegs clear? Is the washing-basin all right?"

A faint light came in as Harriett pushed up the frosted pane.

"Here's a pair of boots all over the floor and your old Zulu hat hanging on a peg. The basin's all right except a perfectly foul smell of nicotine. It's pater's old feather."

"That doesn't matter. The men won't mind that. My old hat can stay. There are ten pegs out here and all the slab, and there's hardly anything on the hall stand. That's it. Don't cram the window down so as to cut the paper. That'll do. Come on."

"I wish I had a really stunning dress," remarked Miriam, as they tapped across the wide hall.

"You needn't."

The drawing-room door was open. They surveyed the sea of drugget, dark grey in the fading light. "*Pong-pong-pong de doodle, pong-pong-pong de doodle,*" murmured Miriam as they stood swaying on tiptoe in the doorway.

"Let's have the gas and *two* candlesticks, Harry, on the dressing-table under the gas."

PILGRIMAGE

"All right," mouthed Harriett in a stage whisper, making for the stairs as the breakfast-room door opened.

It was Eve. "I say, Eve, I'm *scared*," said Miriam, meeting her.

Eve giggled triumphantly.

"Look here. I shan't come down at first. I'll play the first dance. I'll get them all started with 'Bitter-Sweet.' "

"Don't worry, Mim."

"My *dear*, I simply don't know how to face the evening."

"You do," murmured Eve. "You are proud."

"What of?"

"You know quite well."

"What?"

"He's the nicest boy we know."

"But he's not my boy. Of course not. You're insane. Besides, I don't know who you're talking about."

"Oh, well, we won't talk. We'll go and arrange your chignon."

"I'm going to have simply twists and perhaps a hair ornament."

BACKWATER

14

Miriam reached the conservatory from the garden door and set about opening the lid of the grand piano. She could see at the far end of the almost empty drawing-room a little ruddy thick-set bearded man with a roll of music under his arm talking to her mother. He was standing very near to her, surrounding her with his eager presence. "Mother's wonderful," thought Miriam, with a moment's adoration for Mrs. Henderson's softly-smiling girlish tremulousness. Listening to the man's hilarious expostulating narrative voice she fumbled hastily for her waltz amongst the scattered piles of music on the lid of the piano.

As she struck her opening chords she watched her mother gently quell the narrative and steer the sturdy form towards a group of people hesitating in the doorway. "Have they had coffee?" she wondered anxiously. "Is Mary driving them into the dining-room properly?" Before she had reached the end of her second page everyone had disappeared. She paused a moment and looked down the brightly lit empty room—the sight of the cold sheeny drugget filled her with

PILGRIMAGE

despair. The hilarious voice resounded in the hall. There couldn't be many there yet. Were they all looking after them properly? For a moment she was tempted to leave her piano and go and make some desperate attempt at geniality. Then the sound of the pervading voice back again in the room and brisk footsteps coming towards the conservatory drove her back to her music. The little man stepped quickly over the low moulding into the conservatory.

"Ah, Mariamne," he blared gently.

"Oh, Bennett, you angel, how *did* you get here so early?" responded Miriam, playing with zealous emphasis.

"Got old Barrowgate to finish off the outpatients," he said with a choke of amusement.

"I say, Mirry, don't you play. Let me take it on. You go and ply the light fantastic." He laid his hands upon her shoulders and burred the tune she was playing like a muted euphonium over the top of her head. "No. It's all right. Go and get them dancing. Get over the awfulness—you know."

"Get over the awfulness, eh? Oh, I'll get over the awfulness."

"Ssh—are there many there?"

BACK WATER

They both looked round into the drawing-room.

Nan Babington was backing slowly up and down the room supported by the outstretched arms of Bevan Seymour, her black head thrown back level with his, the little scarlet knot in her hair hardly registering the smooth movements of her invisible feet.

"They seem to have begun," shouted Bennett in a whisper as Harriett and her fiancé swung easily circling into the room and were followed by two more couples.

"Go and dance with Meg. She only knows Tommy Babington."

"Like the lid up?"

15

Miriam's rhythmic clangour doubled its resonance in the tiled conservatory as the great lid of the piano went up.

"Magnifique, Mirry, parfaitement magnifique," intoned Tommy Babington, appearing in the doorway with Meg on his arm.

"Bonsoir, Tomasso."

"You are like an expressive metronome."

"Oh—nom d'un pipe."

PILGRIMAGE

"You would make a rhinoceros dance."

Adjusting his pince-nez he dexterously seized tall Meg and swung her rapidly in amongst the dancers.

"Sarah'll say he's had a Turkish bath," thought Miriam, recalling the unusual clear pallor of his rather overfed face. "Pleated shirt. That's to impress Meg."

She felt all at once that the air seemed cold. It was not like a summer night. How badly the ferns were arranged. Nearly all of them together on the staging behind the end of the piano; not enough visible from the drawing-room. Her muscles were somehow stiffening into the wrong mood. Presently she would be playing badly. She watched the forms circling past the gap in the curtains and slowed a little. The room seemed fairly full.

"That's it—perfect, Mim," signalled Harriett's partner, swinging her by. She held to the fresh rhythm and passing into a tender old waltz tune that she knew by heart gave herself to her playing. She need not watch the feet any longer. She could go on for ever. She knew she was not playing altogether for the dancers. She was playing to two hearers. But she could not play

BACKWATER

that tune if they came. They would be late. But they must be here now. Where were they? Were they having coffee? Dancing? She flung a terrified glance at the room and met the cold eye of Bevan Seymour. She would not look again. The right feeling for the dreamy old tune came and went uncontrollably. Why did they not come? Presently she would be cold and sick and done for, for the evening. She played on, harking back to the memory of the kindly challenge in the eyes of her brother-in-law to be, dancing gravely with a grave Harriett—fearing her . . . writing in her album:

"She was his life,
The ocean to the river of his thoughts—
Which terminated all."

. . . cold, calm little Harriett. Her waltz had swung soft and low and the dancers were hushed. Only Tommy Babington's voice still threaded the little throng.

Someone held back the near curtain. A voice said quietly, "Here she is."

16

Ted's low, faintly-mocking voice filled the conservatory.

PILGRIMAGE

He was standing very near her, looking down at her with his back to the gay room. Yesterday's dream had come more than true, at once, at the beginning of the evening. He had come straight to her with his friend, not dancing, not looking for a partner. They were in the little green enclosure with her. The separating curtains had fallen back into place.

Behind the friend who stood leaning against the far end of the piano, the massed fernery gleamed now with the glow of concealed fairy lamps. She had not noticed it before. The fragrance of fronds and moist warm clumps of maidenhair and scented geraniums inundated her as she glanced across at the light falling on hard sculptured waves of hair above a white handsome face.

Her music held them all, protecting the wordless meeting. Her last night's extremity of content was reality, being lived by all three of them. It centred in herself. Ted stood within it, happy in it. The friend watched, witnessing Ted's confession. Ted had said nothing to him about her, about any of them, in his usual way. But he was disguising nothing now that he had come.

BACKWATER

At the end of her playing she stood up faintly dizzy, and held out towards Max Sonnenheim's familiar strangeness hands heavy with happiness and quickened with the sense of Ted's touch upon her arm. The swift crushing of the strange hands upon her own, steadied her as the curtains swung wide and a group of dancers crowded in.

17

"Don't tell N.B. we've scrubbed the coffin, Miriorama—she'll sit there all the evening."

"That was my sister and my future brother-in-law," said Miriam to Max Sonnenheim as Harriett and Gerald ran down the steps and out into the dark garden.

"Your sister and brother-in-law," he responded thoughtfully.

He was standing at her side at the top of the garden steps staring out into the garden and apparently not noticing the noisy passers-by. If they stood there much longer, Ted, who had not been dancing, would join them. She did not want that. She would put off her dance with Ted until later. The next dance she would play herself and then perhaps dance again with Max. Once more from the strange security of his

PILGRIMAGE

strongly swinging arms she would meet Ted's eyes, watching and waiting. She must dance once more with Max. She had never really danced before. She would go to Ted at last and pass on the spirit of her dancing to him. But not yet.

"I will show you the front garden," she said, running down the steps.

He joined her and they walked silently round the side of the house, through the kitchen yard and out into the deserted carriage drive. She thought she saw people on the front lawn and walked quickly, humming a little tune, on down the drive.

Max crunched silently along a little apart from her, singing to himself.

18

Both sides of the front gate were bolted back and their footsteps carried them straight out on to the asphalted avenue extending right and left, a dim tunnel of greenery, scarcely lit by the lamps out in the roadway. With a sudden sense of daring, Miriam determined to assume the deserted avenue as part of the garden.

BACKWATER

The gate left behind, they made their way slowly along the high leafy tunnel.

They would walk to the end of the long avenue and back again. In a moment she would cease humming and make a remark. She tasted a new sense of ease, walking slowly along with this strange man without "making conversation." He was taking her silence for granted. All her experience so far had been of companions whose uneasiness pressed unendurably for speech, and her talking had been done with an irritated sense of the injustice of aspersions on "women's tongues," while no man could endure a woman's silence . . . even Ted, except when dancing; no woman could, except Minna, in Germany. Max must be foreign, of course, German—of *course*. She could, if she liked, talk of the stars to him. He would neither make jokes nor talk science and want her to admire him, until all the magic was gone. Her mood expanded. He had come just at the right moment. She would keep him with her until she had to face Ted. He was like a big ship towing the little barque of her life to its harbour.

His vague humming rose to a little song. It

PILGRIMAGE

was German. It was the Lorelei. For a moment she forgot everything but pride in her ability to take her share in both music and words.

"You understand German!" he cried.

They had reached the end of the avenue and the starlit roadway opened ahead, lined with meadows.

"Ach, wie schön," breathed Max.

"Wie schön." Miriam was startled by the gay sound of her own voice. It sounded as if she were alone, speaking to herself. She looked up at the spangled sky. The freshening air streamed towards them from the meadows.

"We *must* go back," she said easily, turning in again under the trees.

The limes seemed heavily scented after their breath of the open. They strolled dreamily along keeping step with each other. They would make it a long quiet way to the gate. Miriam felt strangely invisible. It was as if in a moment a voice would come from the clustering lime trees or from the cluster of stars in the imagined sky.

"Wie süß," murmured Max, "ist treue Liebe."

"How dear," she translated mentally, "is true love." Yes, that was it, that was true, the Ger-

BACKWATER

man phrase. Ted was dear, dear. But so far away. Coming and going, far away.

"Is it?" she said with a vague, sweet intonation, to hear more.

"Wie süß, wie süß," he repeated firmly, flinging his arm across her shoulders.

The wildly shimmering leafage rustled and seemed to sing. She walked on horrified, cradled, her elbow resting in her companion's hand as in a cup. She laughed, and her laughter mingled with the subdued lilting of the voice close at her side. Ted was waiting somewhere in the night for her. Ted. Ted. Not this stranger. But why was he not bold like this? Primly and gently she disengaged herself.

She and Ted would walk along through the darkness and it would shout to them. Day-time colours seemed to be shining through the night. . . . She turned abruptly to her companion.

"Aren't the lime trees jolly?" she said conversationally.

"You will dance again with me?"

"Yes, if you like."

"I must go so early."

"Must go?"

"To-morrow morning early I go abroad."

PILGRIMAGE

19

“Hullo!”

“Where were *you* all that last dance?”

Nan Babington’s voice startled her as they came into the bright hall through the open front door.

She smiled towards Nan, sitting drearily with a brilliant smile on her face watching the dancers from a long chair drawn up near the drawing-room door, and passed on into the room with her hand on her partner’s arm. They had missed a dance and an interval. It must have been a Lancers and now there was another waltz.

Several couples were whirling gravely about. Amongst them she noted Bevan Seymour, upright and slender, dancing with Harriett with an air of condescending vivacity, his bright teeth showing all the time. Her eyes were ready for Ted. She was going to meet his for the first time—just one look, and then she would fly for her life anywhere, to anybody. And he would find her and make her look at him again. Ted. He was not there. People were glancing at her, curiously. She veiled her waiting eyes and felt their radiance stream through her, flooding her

BACKWATER

with strength from head to foot. How battered and ordinary everyone had looked, frail and sick, stamped with a pallor of sickness. How she pitied them all.

"Let us take a short turn," said Max, and his arms came around her. As they circled slowly down the length of the room she stared at his black shoulder a few inches from her eyes. His stranger's face was just above her in the bright light; his strange black-stitched glove holding her mittened hand. His arms steadied her as they neared the conservatory.

"Let us go out," she heard him say, and her footsteps were guided across the moulding, her arm retained in his. Meg Wedderburn was playing and met her with her sentimental smile. In the gloom at her side, just beyond the shaded candle, stood Ted ready to turn the music, his disengaged hand holding the bole of a tall palm. He dropped his hands and turned as they passed him, almost colliding with Miriam. "Next dance with me," he whispered neatly. "Will you show me your coffin?" asked Max as they reached the garden steps.

"It's quite down at the end beyond the kitchen garden."

PILGRIMAGE

20

"There are raspberry canes all along here, on both sides—trailing all over the place; the gardener puts up stakes and things but they manage to trail all over the place."

"Ah, yes."

"Some of them are that pale yellow kind, the colour of champagne. You can just see how they trail. Isn't it funny how dark they are, and yet the colour's there all the time, isn't it? They are lovely in the day, lovely leaves and great big fruit, and in between are little squatty gooseberry bushes, all kinds, yellow and egg-shaped like plums, and little bright green round ones and every kind of the ordinary red kind. Do you know the little bright green ones, quite bright green when they're ripe, like bright green chartreuse?"

"No. The green chartreuse of course I know. But green ripe gooseberries I have not seen."

"I expect you only know the unripe green ones they make April fool of."

"April fool?"

"I mean *gooseberry* fool. Do you know why men are like green gooseberries?"

BACKWATER

"No. Why are they? Tell me."

"Perhaps you would not like it. We are passing the apple trees now; quarendens and stibbards."

"Tell me. I shall like what you say."

"Well, it's because women can make fools of them whenever they like."

Max laughed; a deep gurgling laugh that echoed back from the wall in front of them.

"We are nearly at the end of the garden."

"I think you would not make a man a fool. No?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it."

"You have not thought much about men."

"I don't know."

"But they, they have thought about you."

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know."

"You do not care, perhaps?"

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. Here's the coffin. I'm afraid it's not very comfortable. It's so low."

"What is it?"

"It's an overturned seedling box. There's grass all around. I wonder whether it's damp," said Miriam, suddenly invaded by a general uncertainty.

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh, we will sit down, it will not be damp. Your future brother-in-law has not scrubbed also the ivy on the wall," he pursued as they sat down on the broad low seat, "it will spoil your blouse."

Miriam leaned uncomfortably against the intervening arm.

"Isn't it a perfectly lovely night?" she said.

"I feel that you would not make of a man a fool. . . ."

"Why not?"

"I feel that there is no poison in you."

"What *do* you mean?" People . . . poisonous . . . What a horrible idea.

"Just what I say."

"I know in a way. I think I know what you mean."

"I feel that there is no poison in you. I have not felt that before with a woman."

"Aren't women awful?" Miriam made a little movement of sympathy towards the strange definiteness at her side.

"I have thought so. But you are not as the women one meets. You have a soul serene and innocent. With you it should be well with a man."

BACKWATER

"I don't know," responded Miriam. "Is he telling me I am a fool?" she thought. "It's true, but no one has the courage to tell me."

"It is most strange. I talk to you here as I will. It is simple and fatal"; the supporting arm became a gentle encirclement and Miriam's heart beat softly in her ears. "I go to-morrow to Paris to the branch of my father's business that is managed there by my brother. And I go then to New York to establish a branch there. I shall be away then, perhaps a year. Shall I find you here?"

A quick crunching on the gravel pathway just in front of them made them both hold their breath to listen. Someone was standing on the grass near Max's side of the coffin. A match spat and flared and Miriam's heart was shaken by Ted's new, eager, frightened voice. "Aren't you *ever* going to dance with me again?"

She had seen the whiteness of his face and his cold, delicate, upright figure. In spirit she had leapt to her feet and faltered his name. All the world she knew had fallen into newness. This was certainty. Ted would never leave her. But it was Max who was standing up and saying richly in the blackness left by the burnt-out

PILGRIMAGE

match, "All in good time, Burton. Miss Miriam is engaged to me for this dance." Her faint "of course, Ted," was drowned in the words which her partner sang after the footsteps retreating rapidly along the gravel path: "We're just coming!"

"I suppose they've begun the next dance," she said, rising decisively and brushing at her velvet skirt with trembling hands.

"Our dance. Let us go and dance our dance."

They walked a little apart steadily along up through the kitchen garden, their unmatched footsteps sounding loudly upon the gravel between remarks made by Max. Miriam heard them and heard the voice of Max. But she neither listened nor responded.

She began to talk and laugh at random as they neared the lawn lit by the glaring uncurtained windows.

Consulting his scrutinising face as they danced easily in the as yet half-empty room, he humming the waltz which swung with their movement, she found narrow, glinting eyes looking into her own; strange eyes that knew all about a big business and were going to Paris and New York. His stranger's face was going away, to be

BACKWATER

washed and shaved innumerable times, keeping its assurance in strange places she knew nothing about.

Here, just for these few hours, laughing at Ted. A phrase flashed through her brain, "He's brought Ted to his senses." She flushed and laughed vaguely and danced with a feeling of tireless strength and gaiety. She knew the phrase was not her own. It was one Nan Babington could have used. It excited her. It meant that real things were going to happen, she could bear herself proudly in the room. She rippled complacently at Max. The room was full of whirling forms, swelling and shrinking as they crossed and recrossed the line between the clear vision rimmed by her glasses and the surrounding bright confusion. Swift, rhythmic movement, unbroken and unjostled, told her how well they were dancing. She was secure, landed in life, dancing carelessly out and out to a life of her own.

"I go; I see you again in a year," said Max suddenly, drawing up near the door where Mrs. Henderson stood sipping coffee with Sarah and Bennett.

"Where is Burton?" he asked in the midst of his thanks and leave-taking.

PILGRIMAGE

They all hesitated. Miriam suddenly found herself in the presence of a tribunal.

Bennett's careless "Oh, he's gone; couldn't stay," followed her as she flung upstairs to Meg Wedderburn's empty room. Why had her mother looked so self-conscious and Sarah avoided her eye . . . standing there like a little group of conspirators?

People were always inventing things. "Bother—damnational silliness," she muttered, and began rapidly calculating. Ted gone away. Little Ted hurt and angry. To-morrow. Perhaps he wouldn't come. If he didn't she wouldn't see him before she went. The quiet little bead of ruby shaded gas reproached her. Meg's eyes would be sad and reproachful in this quiet neatness. Terror seized her. She wouldn't see him. He had finished his work at the Institution. It was the big Norwich job next week.

CHAPTER III

1

MIRIAM propped "The Story of Adèle" open against the three Bibles on the dressing-table. It would be wasteful to read it upstairs. It was the only story-book amongst the rows of volumes which filled the shelves in the big schoolroom and would have to last her for tea-time reading the whole term. The "Fleurs de l'Eloquence?" Shiny brown leather covered with little gold buds and tendrils, fresh and new although the parchment pages were yellow with age. The Fleurs were so short . . . that curious page signed "Froissart" with long s's, coming to an end just as the picture of the French court was getting clear and interesting. That other thing "The Anatomy of Melancholy." Fascinating. But it would take so much reading, on and on forgetting everything; all the ordinary things, seeing things in some new way, some way that fascinated people for a moment if you tried

PILGRIMAGE

to talk about it and then made them very angry, made them hate and suspect you. Impossible to take it out and have it on the schoolroom table for tea-time reading. What had made the Pernes begin allowing tea-time reading? Being shy and finding it difficult to keep conversation going with the girls for so long? They never did talk to the girls. Perhaps because they did not see through them and understand them. North London girls. So different from the Fairchild family and the sort of girls they had been accustomed to when they were young. Anyhow, they hardly ever had to talk to them. Not at breakfast or dinner-time when they were all three there; and at tea-time when there was only one of them, there were always the books. How sensible. On Sunday afternoons, coming smiling into the schoolroom, one of them each Sunday—perhaps the others were asleep—reading aloud; the Fairchild family, smooth and good and happy, everyone in the book surrounded with a sort of light, going on and on and on towards heaven, tea-time seeming so nice and mean and ordinary afterwards—or a book about a place in the north of England called Saltcoats, brine, and a vicarage and miners; the people in the book

BACKWATER

horrible, not lit up, talking about things and being gloomy and not always knowing what to do, never really sure about Heaven like the Fairchild family, black brackish book. The "Fairchild Family" was golden and gleaming.

"The Anatomy of Melancholy" would not be golden like "The Fairchild Family" . . . "the cart was now come alongside a wood which was exceedingly shady and beautiful"; "good manners and civility make everybody lovely"; but it would be round and real, not just chilly and moaning like "Saltcoats." The title would be enough to keep one going at tea-time. *Anat—omy of Mel—ancholy*, and the look of the close-printed pages and a sentence here and there. The Pernes would not believe she really wanted it there on the table. The girls would stare. When "The Story of Adèle" was finished she would have to find some other book; or borrow one. Nancie Wilkie, sitting at tea with her back to the closed piano facing the great bay of dark green-blinded window, reading "Nicholas Nickleby." Just the very one of all the Dickens volumes that would be likely to come into her hands. Impossible to borrow it when Nancie had finished with it. Impossible to read a book

PILGRIMAGE

with such a title. "David Copperfield" was all right; and "The Pickwick Papers." "Little Dorritt"—"A Tale of Two Cities"—"The Old Curiosity Shop." There was something suspicious about these, too.

2

Adèle—the story of Adèle. The book had hard, unpleasant covers with some thin cottony material—bright lobelia blue—strained over them and fraying out at the corners. Over the front of the cover were little garlands and festoons of faded gold, and in the centre framed by an oval band of brighter gold was the word Adèle, with little strong tendrils on the lettering. There was some secret charm about the book. The strong sunlight striking the window just above the coarse lace curtains that obscured its lower half, made the gilding shine and seem to move—a whole wild woodland. The coarse white toilet-cover on the chest of drawers, the three Bibles, the little cheap mahogany-framed looking-glass, Nancie Wilkie's folding hand-glass, the ugly gas bracket sticking out above the mirror, her own bed in the corner with its coarse fringed coverlet, the two alien beds behind her in the room, and

BACKWATER

the repellent washstand in the far corner became friendly as the sun shone on the decorated cover of the blue and gold book.

She propped it open again and began tidying her hair. It must be nearly tea-time. A phrase caught her eye. "The old château where the first years of Adèle's life were spent was situated in the midst of a high-walled garden. Along one side of the château ran a terrace looking out over a lovely expanse of flower-beds. Beyond was a little pleasance surrounded by a miniature wall and threaded by little pathways lined with rose trees. Almost hidden in the high wall was a little doorway. When the doorway was open you could see through into a deep orchard." The first tea-bell rang. The figure of Adèle flitting about in an endless summer became again lines of black print. In a moment the girls would come rushing up. Miriam closed the book and turned to the dazzling window. The sun blazed just above the gap in the avenue of poplars. A bright yellow pathway led up through the green of the public cricket ground, pierced the avenue of poplars and disappeared through the further greenery in a curve that was the beginning of its encirclement of the park lake. Coming slowly

PILGRIMAGE

along the pathway was a little figure dressed bunchily in black. It looked pathetically small and dingy in the bright scene. The afternoon blazed round it. It was something left over. What was the explanation of it? As it came near it seemed to change. It grew real. It was hurrying eagerly along, quite indifferent to the afternoon glory, with little rolling steps that were like the uneven toddling of a child, and carrying a large newspaper whose great sheets, although there was no wind, belled out scarcely controlled by the small hands. Its feathered hat had a wind-blown rakish air. On such a still afternoon. It was thinking and coming along, thinking and thinking and a little angry. What a rum little party, murmured Miriam, despising her words and admiring the wild thought-filled little bundle of dingy clothes. Beastly, to be picking up that low kind of slang—not real slang. Just North London sneering. Goo—what a *rum* little party, she declared aloud, flattening herself against the window. Hotly flushing, she recognised that she had been staring at Miss Jenny Perne hurrying in to preside at tea.

BACKWATER

3

"We've been to Jones's this afternoon, Miss Jenny."

Each plate held a slice of bread and butter cut thickly all the way across a household loaf, and the three-pound jar of home-made plum jam belonging to Nancie Wilkie was going the round of the table. It had begun with Miriam, who sat on Miss Jenny's right hand, and had Nancie for neighbour. She had helped herself sparingly, unable quite to resist the enhancement of the solid fare, but fearing that there would be no possibility of getting anything from home to make a return in kind. Things were so bad, the dance had cost so much. One of Mary's cakes, big enough for five people, would cost so much. And there would be the postage.

Piling a generous spoonful on to her own thick slice, Nancie coughed facetiously and repeated her remark which had produced no result but a giggle from Charlotte Stubbs who sat opposite to her.

"Eh? Eh? What?"

Miss Jenny looked down the table over the top of her newspaper without raising her head.

PILGRIMAGE

Her prince-nez were perched so that one eye appeared looking through its proper circle, the other glared unprotected just above a rim of glass.

"Miss Haddie took us to Jones's this afternoon," said Nancie almost voicelessly. Miriam glanced at the too familiar sight of Nancie's small eyes vanishing to malicious points. She was sitting as usual very solid and upright in her chair, with her long cheeks pink flushed and her fine nose white and cool and twitching, her yellow hair standing strongly back from her large white brow. She stabbed keenly in her direction as Miriam glanced, and Miriam turned and applied herself to her bread and jam. If she did not eat she would not get more than two slices from the piled dishes before the others had consumed four and five apiece and brought tea to an end.

"Eh? what for? Why are ye laughing, Nancie?"

"I'm not laughing, Miss Jenny." Nancie's firm lips curved away from her large faultless teeth. "I'm only smiling and telling you about our visit to Jones's."

Miss Jenny's newspaper was lowered and her pince-nez removed.

BACKWATER

"Eh? What d'ye say? Nonsense, Nancie, you know you were laughing. Why do you say you weren't? What do you mean? Eh?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Jenny. Something tickled me."

"Yes. Don't be nonsensical. D'ye see? It's nonsensical to say no when you mean yes. D'ye understand what I mean, Nancie. It's bad manners." Hitching on her pince-nez, Miss Jenny returned to her paper.

Miriam gave herself up to the luxury of reading Adèle to the accompaniment of bread and jam. She would not hurry over her bread and jam. As well not have it. She would sacrifice her chance of a third slice. She reflected that it would be a good thing if she could decide never to have more than two slices, and have them in peace. Then she could thoroughly enjoy her reading. But she was always so hungry. At home she could not have eaten thick bread and butter. But here every slice seemed better than the last. When she began at the hard thick edge there always seemed to be tender places on her gums, her three hollow teeth were uneasy and she had to get through worrying thoughts about them—they would get worse as the years went by,

PILGRIMAGE

and the little places in the front would grow big and painful and disfiguring. After the first few mouthfuls of solid bread a sort of padding seemed to take place and she could go on forgetful.

"They'd got," said Trixie Sanderson in a velvety tone, "they'd got some of their Christmas things out, Miss Jenny." She cleared her throat shrilly on the last word and toned off the sound with a sigh. Inaudible laughter went round the table, stopping at Miriam, who glanced fascinated across at Trixie. Trixie sat in her best dress, a loosely made brown velveteen with a deep lace collar round her soft brown neck. Her neck and her delicate pale face were shaded by lively silky brown curls. She held her small head sideways from her book with a questioning air. One of her wicked swift brown eyes was covered serenely with its thin lid.

She uttered a second gentle sigh and once more cleared her throat, accompanying the sound with a rapid fluttering of the lowered lid.

Miriam condemned her, flouting the single eye which tried to search her, hating the sudden, sharp dimpling which came high up almost under Trixie's cheek bones in answer to her own expression.

BACK WATER

"Miss Jenny," breathed Trixie in a high tone, twirling one end of the bow of black ribbon crowning her head.

Beadie Fetherwell, at the far end of the table opposite the tea-tray, giggled aloud.

"Eh? What? Did somebody speak?" said Miss Jenny, looking up with a smile. "Are ye getting on with yer teas? Are ye ready for second cups?"

"Beadie spoke," murmured Trixie, glancing at Beadie whose neat china doll's face was half hidden between her cup and the protruding edge of her thatch of tight gold curls.

Miriam digustedly watched Beadie prolong the irritating comedy by choking over her tea.

It was some minutes before the whole incident was made clear to Miss Jenny. Reading was suspended. Everyone watched while Charlotte Stubbs, going carefully backwards, came to the end at last of Miss Jenny's questions, and when Miss Jenny rapidly adjudicating—*well!* you're all very naughty children. I can't think what's the matter with you? Eh? Ye shouldn't do it. I can't think what possesses you. What is it, eh? Ye shouldn't do it. D'you see?—and having dispensed the second allowance of tea with small

PILGRIMAGE

hesitating preoccupied hands returned finally to her newspaper, it was Charlotte who sat looking guilty. Miriam stole a glance at the breadth of her broad flushed face, at its broadest as she hung over her book. Her broad flat nose shone with her tea-drinking, and her shock of coarse brown-gold hair, flatly brushed on the top, stuck out bushily on either side, its edges lit by the afternoon glow from the garden behind her. The others were unmoved. Trixie sat reading, the muscles controlling her high dimples still faintly active. She and Nancie and Beadie, whose opaque blue eyes fixed the table just ahead of her book with their usual half-squinting stare, had entered on their final competition for the last few slices.

Miriam returned to her book. The story of Adèle had moved on through several unassimilated pages. "My child," she read, "it is important to remember"—she glanced on gathering a picture of a woman walking with Adèle along the magic terrace, talking—words and phrases that fretted dismally at the beauty of the scene. Examining later chapters she found conversations, discussions, situations, arguments, "fusses"—all about nothing. She turned back to the

BACKWATER

early passage of description and caught the glow once more. But this time it was overshadowed by the promise of those talking women. That was all there was. She had finished the story of Adèle.

A resounding slam came up from the kitchen.

"Poor cook—another tooth," sighed Trixie.

Smothering a convulsion, Miriam sat dumb. Her thwarted expectations ranged forth beyond control, feeling swiftly and cruelly about for succour where she had learned there was none. . . . Nancie, her parents abroad, her aunt's house at Cromer, with a shrubbery, the cousin from South Africa coming home to Cromer, taking her out in a dog-cart, telling her she was his guiding star, going back to South Africa; everything Nancie said and did, even her careful hair-brushing and her energetic upright walk, her positive brave way of entering a room, coming out through those malicious pin-points—things she said about the Misses Perne and the girls, things she whispered and laughed, little rhymes she sang with her unbearable laugh.

. . . Beadie still shaking at intervals in silent servile glancing laughter, her stepmother, her little half-brother who had fits, her holidays at

PILGRIMAGE

Margate, "you'd look neat, on the seat, of a bicyka made for two"—Beadie brought Miriam the utmost sense of imprisonment within the strange influence that had threatened her when she first came to Banbury Park. Beadie was in it, was an unquestioning part of it. She felt that she could in some way, in some one tint or tone, realise the whole fabric of Beadie's life on and on to the end, no matter what should happen to her. But she turned from the attempt—any effort at full realisation threatened complete despair. Trixie too, with a home just opposite the Banbury Empire. . . . Miriam slid over this link in her rapid reflections—a brother named Julian who took instantaneous photographs of girls, numbers and numbers of girls, and was sometimes "tight." . . .

Charlotte. Charlotte carried about a faint suggestion of relief. Miriam fled to her as she sat with the garden light on her hair, her lingering flush of distress rekindled by her amusement, her protective responsible smile beaming out through the endless blue of her eyes. Behind her painstaking life at the school was a country home, a farm somewhere far away. Of course it was dreadful for her to be a farmer's daughter. She

BACKWATER

evidently knew it herself and said very little about it. But her large red hands, so strange handling school-books, were comforting; and her holland apron with its bib under the fresh colouring of her face—do you like butter? A buttercup under your chin—brought to Miriam a picture of the farm, white amidst bright greenery, with a dairy and morning cock-crow and creamy white sheep on a hillside. It was all there with her as she sat at table reading “The Lamp-lighter.” The sound of her broad husky voice explaining to Miss Jenny had been full of it. But it was all past. She too had come to Banbury Park. She did not seem to mind Banbury Park. She was to study hard and be a governess. She evidently thought she was having a great chance—she was fifteen and quite “uncultured.” How could she be turned into a governess? A sort of nursery governess, for farms, perhaps. But farms did not want books and worry. Miriam wanted to put her back into her farm, and sometimes her thoughts wearily brushed the idea of going with her. Perhaps, though, she had come away because her father could not keep her? The little problem hung about her as she sat sweetly there, common and good and strong. The golden

PILGRIMAGE

light that seemed to belong specially to her came from a London garden, an unreal North London garden. Resounding in its little spaces were the blatterings and shouts of the deaf and dumb next door.

4

Miss Jenny left "The Standard" with Miriam after tea, stopping suddenly as she made her uncertain way from the tea-table to the door and saying absently, "Eh, you'd better read this, my dear. There's a leader on the Education Commission. Would ye like to? Yes, I think you'd better." Miriam accepted the large sheets with hesitating expressions of thanks, wondering rather fearfully what a leader might be and where she should find it. She knew the word. Her mother read "the leaders" in the evening—"excellent leader" she sometimes said, and her father would put down his volume of "Proceedings of the British Association," or Herbert Spencer's "First Principles," and condescendingly agree. But any discussion generally ended in his warning her not to believe a thing because she saw it in print, and a reminder that before she married she had thought that everything she

BACKWATER

saw in print was true, and quite often he would go on to general remarks about the gullibility of women, bringing in the story of the two large long-necked pearly transparent drawing-room vases with stems and soft masses of roses and leaves painted on their sides that she had given too much for at the door to a man who said they were Italian. Brummagem, Brummagem, he would end, mouthing the word and turning back to his book with the neighing laugh that made Miriam turn to the imagined picture of her mother in the first year of her married life, standing in the sunlight at the back door of the Babington house, with the varnished coach-house door on her right and the cucumber frames in front of her sloping up towards the bean-rows that began the kitchen garden; with her little scalloped bodice, her hooped skirt, her hair bunched in curls up on her high pad and falling round her neck, looking at the jugs with grave dark eyes. And that neighing laugh had come again and again all through the years until she sat meekly, flushed and suffering under the fierce gaslight, feeling every night of her life winter and summer as if the ceiling were coming down on her head, and read "leaders" cautiously, and knew when they

PILGRIMAGE

were written in "a fine chaste dignified style." But that was "The Times." "The Standard" was a penny rag and probably not worth considering at all. In any case she would not read it at evening study. She had never had a newspaper in her hand before as far as she could remember. The girls would see that she did not know how to read it, and it would be snubby towards them to sit there as if she were a Miss Perne, scrumpling a great paper while they sat with their books. So she read her text-books, a page of Saxon kings with a ten-line summary of each reign, a list of six English counties with their capitals and the rivers the capitals stood on and the principal industries of each town, devising ways of remembering the lists and went on to "Bell's Standard Elocutionist." She had found the book amongst the school books on the schoolroom shelves. It was a "standard" book and must therefore be about something she ought to know something about if she were to hold her own in this North London world. There had been no "standard" books at school and the word offended her. It suggested fixed agreement about the things people ought to know and that she felt sure must be wrong, and not only wrong but "common" . . . standard readers . . . stan-

BACKWATER

dard pianoforte tutors. She had learned to read in "Reading without Tears," and gone on to "Classical Poems and Prose for the Young," her arithmetic book instead of being a thin cold paper-covered thing called Standard I, had been a pleasant green volume called "Barnard Smith," that began at the beginning and went on to compound fractions and stocks. There was no Morris's Grammar at Banbury Park, no Wetherell or English Accidence, no bits from "Piers Plowman" and pages of scraps of words with the way they changed in different languages and quotations, just sentences that had made her long for more . . . "up-clomb" . . . "the mist up-clomb." She opened "Bell's Standard Elocutionist" apprehensively, her mind working on possible meanings for elocutionist. She thought of ventriloquist and wondered dismally whether it was a book of conjuring tricks. It was poems, poems and prose, all mixed up together anyhow. The room was very still, the girls all sitting reading with their back to the table so that nobody "poked." She could not go on vaguely fluttering pages, so she read a solid-looking poem that was not divided up into verses.

"Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbane And

PILGRIMAGE

Valmond Emperor of Allemaine, Apparelled in magnificent attire, With retinue of many a knight and squire, On St. John's eve, at vespers, proudly sat And heard the priests chant the Magnificat." Should she go on? It was like the pieces in Scott's novels, the best bits, before the characters began to talk.

. . . "and bay the moon than such a Roman and bay the moon than such a Roman," muttered Nancie rapidly, swinging her feet. It would not be fair to read a thing that would take her right away and not teach her anything whilst the girls were learning their things for Monday. She hesitated and turned a page. The poem, she saw, soon began to break up into sentences with quotation signs; somebody making a to-do. Turning several pages at once, she caught sight of the word Hanover. "Hamelin Town's in Brunswick, by famous Hanover city." That was irresistible. But she must read it one day away from the gassy room and the pressure of the girls. The lines were magic; but the rush that took her to the German town, the sight and smell and sound of it, the pointed houses, wood fires, the bürger, had made her cheeks flare and thrown her out of the proper teacher's frame of mind. She wanted to stand up

BACKWATER

and pull up the blinds hiding the garden and shout the poem aloud to the girls. They would stare and giggle and think she had gone mad. "The mountain has gone mad," Nancie would mutter. "There is a mountain in Banbury Park, covered over with yellow bark," Nancie's description of herself. That was how the girls saw her stiff hair—and they thought she was "about forty." Well, it was true. She was, practically. She went on holding Bell up before her face, open at a page of prose, and stared at the keyboard of the piano just beyond her crossed knees. It aroused the sight and sense of the strangely moving hands of the various girls whose afternoon practice it was her business to superintend, their intent faces, the pages of bad unclassical music, things with horrible names, by English composers, the uselessness of the hours and terms and years of practice.

5

Presently the bread and butter and milk came up for the girls, and then there was prayers—the three servants lined up in front of the bookshelves; cook wheezing heavily, tall and thin and bent, with a sloping mob cap and a thin old brown

PILGRIMAGE

face with a forehead that was like a buttress of shiny bone and startling dark eyes that protruded so that they could be seen even when she sat looking down into her lap; and Flora the parlourmaid, short and plump and brown with an expression of perfectly serene despair, that was part of Miriam's daily bread; and Annie the housemaid, raw pink and gold and grinning slyly at the girls—Miss Perne, sitting at the head of the table with the shabby family Bible and the book of family prayers, Miss Jenny and Miss Haddie one on each side of the fire-place, Miss Jenny's feet hardly reaching the floor as she sat bunched on a high schoolroom chair, Miss Haddie in her cold slate-grey dress sitting back with her thin hands clasped in her lap, her grey face bent devotionally so that her chin rested on her thin chest, her eyes darting from the servants to the girls who sat in their places round the table during the time it took Miss Perne to read a short psalm. Miriam tried to cast down her eyes and close her ears. All that went on during that short interval left her equally excluded from either party. She could not sit gazing at Flora, and Miss Perne's polite unvarying tone brought her no comfort. She sometimes thought longingly of prayers in Ger-

BACKWATER

many, the big quiet saal with its high windows, its great dark doors, its annexe of wooden summer-room, Fräulein's clear, brooding undertone, the pensive calm of the German girls; the strange mass of fresh melodious sound as they all sang together. Here there seemed to be everything to encourage and nothing whatever to check the sudden murmur, the lightning swift gesture of Nancie or Trixie.

The moment Miss Perne had finished her psalm they all swung round on to their knees. Miriam pressed her elbows against the cane seat of her chair and wondered what she should say to Miss Jenny at supper about the newspaper, while Miss Perne decorously prayed that they might all be fed with the sincere milk of the Word and grow thereby.

After the Lord's Prayer, a unison of breathy mutterings against closed fingers, they all rose. Then the servants filed out of the room followed by the Misses Perne. Miss Perne stopped in the doorway to shake hands with the girls on their way to bed before joining her sisters in the little sitting-room across the hall. One of the servants reappeared almost at once with a tray, distributed its contents at the fire-place end of the long

PILGRIMAGE

table and rang the little bell in the hall on her way back to the kitchen. The Misses Perne filed back across the hall.

6

"Eh, Deborah, are ye sure?" said Miss Jenny, getting into her chair at Miss Perne's right hand.

Perhaps the newspaper would not be mentioned after all. If it were she would simply say she had been preparing for Monday and was going to read it after supper. Anyhow there was never any threat with the Pernes of anything she would not be able to deal with. She glanced to see what there was to eat, and then, feeling Miss Haddie's eye from across the table, assumed an air of interested abstraction to cover her disappointment. Cold white blancmange in a round dish garnished with prunes, bread and butter, a square of cream cheese on a green-edged dessert plate, a box of plain biscuits, the tall bottle of lime juice and the red glass jug of water. Nothing really sweet and nice—the blancmange would be flavoured with laurel—prussic acid—and the prunes would be sweet in the wrong sort of way—wholesome, just sweet fruit. Cheese—how could people eat cheese?

BACKWATER

"Well, my dear, I tell you only what I saw with my own eyes—Polly Allen and Eunice Dupont running about in the park without their hats."

"Ech," syphoned Miss Haddie, drawing her delicate green-grey eyebrows sharply towards the deep line in the middle of her forehead. She did not look up but sat frowning sourly into her bowl of bread and milk, ladling and pouring the milk from the spoon.

Miriam kept a nervous eye on her acid preoccupation. No one had seen the behaviour of her own face, how one corner of her mouth had shot up so sharply as to bring the feeling of a deeply denting dimple in her cheek. She sat regulating her breathing and carefully extracting the stone from a prune.

"Did ye speak to them?" asked Miss Jenny, fixing her tall sister over her prince-nez.

Miss Perne sat smilingly upright, her black eyes blinking rapidly at the far-off bookshelves.

"I did *not* speak to them——"

"Eh, Deborah, why not?" scolded Miss Jenny as Miss Perne drew breath.

"I did not speak to them," went on Miss Deborah, beaming delightedly at the bookcase, "for

PILGRIMAGE

the very good reason that I was not sufficiently near to them. I was walking upon the asphalt pathway surrounding the lake and had just become engaged in conversation with Mrs. Brinkwell, who had stopped me for the purpose of giving me further details with regard to Constance's prolonged absence from school, when I saw Polly and Eunice apparently chasing one another across the recreation ground in the condition I have described to you."

Miriam, who had felt Miss Haddie's scorn-filled eyes played watchfully over her, sat pressing the sharp edge of her high heel into her ankle.

"Eh, my dear, what a pity you couldn't speak to them. They've no business at all in the recreation ground where the rough boys go."

"Well, I have described to you the circumstances, my dear, and the impossibility of my undertaking any kind of intervention."

"Eh, well, Deborah my dear, I think I should have done something. Don't you think you ought? Eh? Called someone perhaps—eh?—or managed to get at the gels in some way—dear, dear, what is to be done? You see it is hardly of any use to speak to them afterwards. You want

BACKWATER

to catch them red-handed and make them feel ashamed of themselves."

"I am fully prepared to admit, my dear Jenny, the justice of all that you say. But I can only repeat that in the circumstances in which I found myself I was entirely unable to exercise any control whatever upon the doings of the gels. They were running; and long before I was free from Mrs. Brinkwell they were out of sight."

Miss Perne spoke in a clear, high, narrative tone that seemed each moment on the point of delighted laughter, her delicate head held high, her finely wrinkled face puckering with restrained pleasure. Miriam saw vividly the picture in the park, the dreadful, mean, grubby lake, the sad asphalt pathway all round it, the shabby London greenery, the October wind rushing through it, Miss Perne's high stylish arrowy figure fluttered by the wind, swaying in her response to Mrs. Brinkwell's story, the dreadful asphalt playground away to the left, its gaunt swings and bars—gallows. . . . Ingoldsby—the girls rushing across it, and held herself sternly back from a vision of Miss Perne chasing the delinquents down the wind. Why did Miss Perne speak so triumphantly? As much as to say There, my dear

PILGRIMAGE

Jenny, there's a problem you can't answer. She enjoyed telling the tale and was not really upset about the girls. She spoke exactly as if she were reading aloud from "Robinson Crusoe." Miss Haddie was watching again, flashing her eyes about as she gently spooned up her bread and milk. Miriam wished she knew whether Miss Haddie knew how difficult it was to listen gravely. She was evidently angry and disgusted. But still she could watch.

"Did ye go that way at all afterwards—the way the girls went?"

"I did not," beamed Miss Perne, turning to Miss Jenny as if waiting for a judgment.

"Well, eh, I'm sure, really, it's most diffikilt. What is one to do with these gels? Now, Miriam, here's something for you to exercise your wits upon. What would ye do, eh?"

Miriam hesitated. Memories kept her dumb. Of course she had never rushed about in a common park where rough boys came. At the same time—if the girls wanted to rush about and scream and wear no hats nobody had any right to interfere with them . . . they ought to be suppressed though, North London girls, capable of anything in the way of horridness . . . the Pernes did not

BACKWATER

seem to see how horrid the girls were in themselves, common and knowing and horrid. "Dear, funny little O.M.'s" . . . they were something much more than that. They were wrong about the hats, but it was good, heavenly to be here like this with them. She turned to Miss Jenny, her mind in a warm confusion, and smiled into the little red face peering delicately from out its disorderly Gorgon loops.

"Well?"

"My dear Jenny," said Miss Haddie's soft hollow voice, "how should the child judge?"

Miriam's heart leapt. She smiled inanely and eagerly accepted a second helping of blancmange suddenly proffered by Miss Perne, who was drawing little panting breaths and blinking sharply at her.

"Nonsense, Haddie. Come along, my dear, it's a chance for you. Come along."

"Tomboys," said Miss Haddie indignantly.

Miriam drew a breath. It was wrong, they were not tomboys—she knew they had not run like tomboys—they had scuttled, she was sure—horrid girls, that was what they were, nothing the Pernes could understand. The Pernes ought not to be bothered with them.

PILGRIMAGE

"Well," she said, feeling a sudden security, "are we responsible for them out of school hours?"

Miss Haddie's eyebrows moved nervously, and Miss Perne's smile turned to a dubious mouthing.

"Eh, there you are. D'ye see, Deborah. That's it. That's the crucial point. Are we responsible? I'm sure I can't say. That places the whole difficulty in a nutshell. Here are these gels, not even day boarders. How far can we control their general behaviour? Eh? I'm sure I don't know."

"My dear Jenny," said Miss Haddie quickly, her hollow voice reverberating as if she were using a gargle, "it's quite obvious that we can't have gels known to belong to the school running about in the park with nothing on."

"I agree, my dear Haddie. But, as Jenny says, how are we to prevent such conduct?"

"Don't let us lose sight of Miriam's point. *Are we responsible for their play-times?* I suppose we're *not*, you know, Deborah, really after all. Not directly, perhaps. But sheerly we are *indirectly* responsible. Sheerly. We ought to be able to make it impossible for them to carry on in this unseemly fashion."

BACKWATER

"Yes, yes," said Miss Deborah eagerly, "sheerly."

"Is it education?" suggested Miriam.

"That's it, my dear. It is education. That's what's wanted. That's what these gels want. I don't know, though. All this talk of education. It ought to be the thing. And yet look at these two gels. Both of them from Miss Cass's. There's her school now. Famous all over London. Three hundred gels. We've had several here. And they've all had that objectionable noisy tone. Eh, Deborah? I don't know. How is it to be accounted for? Eh?"

"I've never heard of Miss Cass's," said Miriam.

"My dear child! It's not possible! D'ye mean to say ye don't know Miss Cass's high school?"

"Oh, if it's a high school, of *course*."

All three ladies waited, with their eyes on her, making a chorus of inarticulate sounds.

"Oh well, high schools are simply fearful."

Miriam glowed in a tide of gentle cackling laughter.

"Well, you know, I think there's something in it," giggled Miss Jenny softly. "It's the num-

PILGRIMAGE

ber perhaps. That's what I always say, Deborah. Treating the gels like soldiers. Like a regiment. D'ye see? No individual study of the gels' characters——"

"Well. However that may be, I am sure of one thing. I am sure that on Monday Polly and Eunice must be reprimanded. Severely reprimanded."

"Yes. I suppose they must. They're nice gels at heart, you know. Both of them. That's the worst of it. Well, I hardly mean that. Only so often the naughty gels are so thoroughly—well—nice, likable at bottom, ye know, eh? I'm sure. I don't know."

7

Miriam sat on in the schoolroom after supper with the newspaper spread out on the brown American cloth table cover under the gas. She found a long column headed "The Royal Commission on Education." The Queen, then, was interesting herself in education. But in England the sovereign had no power, was only a figure-head. Perhaps the Queen had been advised to interest herself in education by the Privy Council and the Conservatives, people of leisure and culti-

BACKWATER

vation. A commission was a sort of command—it must be important, something the Privy Council had decided and sent out in the Queen's name.

She read her column, sitting comfortably between the window and the open door. As she read the room grew still. The memory of the talking and clinking supper-table faded, and presently even the ticking of the clock was no longer there. She raised her head at last. No wonder people read newspapers. You could read about what was going on in the country, actually what the Government was doing at that very moment. Of course; men seemed to know such a lot because they read the newspapers and talked about what was in them. But anybody could know as much as the men sitting in the armchairs if they chose; read all about everything, written down for everybody to see. That was the freedom of the Press—*Areopagitica*, that the history books said so much about and was one of those new important things, more important than facts and dates. Like the Independence of Ireland. Yet very few people really talked like newspapers. Only angry men with loud voices. Here was the free Press that Milton had gone to prison for. Certainly it made a great difference. The room was quite

PILGRIMAGE

changed. There was hardly any pain in the silent cane-seated chairs. There were really people making the world better. Now. At last. Perhaps it was rather a happy fate to be a teacher in the Banbury Park school and read newspapers. There were plenty of people who could neither read nor write. Someone had a servant like that who did all the marketing and never forgot anything or made any mistake over the change—none the worse for it, pater said, people who wanted book-learning could get it, there must always be hewers of wood and drawers of water, *laissez faire*. But Gladstone did not believe that. At this moment Gladstone was saying that because the people of England as a whole were uneducated their “condition of ignorance” affected the whole of the “body politic.” That was Gladstone. He had found that out . . . with large moist silky eyes like a dog and pointed collars seeing things as they were and going to change them. . . . Miriam stirred uneasily as she felt the beating of her heart. . . . If only she were at home how she could rush up and down the house and shout about it and shake Mary by the shoulders. She shrank into herself and sat stiffly up, suddenly discovering she was lounging over the table. As

BACKWATER

she moved she reflected that probably Gladstone's being so very dark made him determined that things should not go on as they were. In that case Gladstonians would be dark—perhaps not musical. Someone had said musical people were a queer soft lot. *Laissez faire*. Lazy fair. But perhaps it was possible to be fair and musical and to be a Gladstonian too. You can't have your cake and eat it. No. It was a good thing, one's best self knew it was a good thing that someone had found out why people were so awful; like a dentist finding out a bad tooth however much it hurt. Only if education was going to be the principal thing and all teachers were to be 'qualified' it was no use going on. Miss Jenny had said private schools were doomed.

8

For a long time she sat blankly contemplating the new world that was coming. Everyone would be trained and efficient but herself. She was not strong enough to earn a living and qualify as a teacher at the same time. The day's work tired her to death. She must hide somewhere. . . . She would not be wanted. . . . If you were not wanted. . . . If you knew you were not wanted

PILGRIMAGE

—you ought to get out of the way. Chloroform. Someone had drunk a bottle of carbolic acid. The clock struck ten. Gathering up the newspaper she folded it neatly, put it on the hall table and went slowly upstairs, watching the faint reflection of the half-lowered hall gas upon the polished balustrade. The staircase was cold and airy. Cold rooms and landings stretched up away above her into the darkness. She became aware of a curious buoyancy rising within her. It was so strange that she stood still for a moment on the stair. For a second, life seemed to cease in her and the staircase to be swept from under her feet. . . . “I’m alive.” . . . It was as if something had struck her, struck right through her impalpable body, sweeping it away, leaving her there shouting silently without it. I’m alive. . . . I’m alive. Then with a thump her heart went on again and her feet carried her body warm and happy and elastic easily on up the solid stairs. She tried once or twice deliberately to bring back the breathless moment standing still on a stair. Each time something of it returned. “It’s me, *me*; this is *me* being alive,” she murmured with a feeling under her like the sudden drop of a lift. But her thoughts distracted her. They were

BACKWATER

eagerly talking to her declaring that she had had this feeling before. She opened her bedroom door very quietly. The air of the room told her that Nancie and Beadie were asleep. Going lightly across to the chest of drawers dressing-table by the window as if she were treading on air, she stood holding its edge in the darkness. Two forgotten incidents flowed past her in quick succession; one of waking up on her seventh birthday in the seaside villa alone in a small dark room and suddenly saying to herself that one day her father and mother would die and she would still be there, and after a curious moment when the darkness seemed to move against her, feeling very old and crying bitterly, and another of standing in the bow of the dining-room window at Barnes looking at the rain-drops falling from the leaves through the sunshine and saying to Eve, who came into the room as she watched, "D'you know, Eve, I feel as if I'd suddenly wakened up out of a dream." The bedroom was no longer dark. She could see the outlines of everything in the light coming from the street lamps through the half-closed Venetian blinds. Beadie sighed and stirred. Miriam began impatiently preparing for bed without lighting the gas. "What's the use of feeling like that

PILGRIMAGE

if it doesn't stay? It doesn't change anything. Next time I'll make it stay. It might whisk me right away. There's something in me that can't be touched or altered. Me. If it comes again. If it's stronger every time. . . . Perhaps it goes on getting stronger till you die."

CHAPTER IV

1

WHEEZING, cook had spread a plaster of dampened ashy cinders upon the basement schoolroom fire and gone bonily away across the oilcloth in her heelless boots. As the door closed Miriam's eye went up from her book to the little slope of grass showing above the concrete wall of the area. The grass gleamed along the edge of a bank of mist. In the mist the area railings stood hard and solid against the edge of empty space. Several times she glanced at the rich green, feeling that neither 'emerald,' 'emerald velvet,' nor 'velvety enamel' quite expressed it. She had not noticed that there was a mist shutting in and making brilliant the half-darkness of the room at breakfast-time, only feeling that for some reason it was a good day. "It's fog—there's a sort of fog," she said, glowing. The fog made the room with the strange brilliant brown light on the table, on the horsehair chairs, on the shabby length of brown and yellow oilcloth

PILGRIMAGE

running out to the bay of the low window, seem to be rushing through space, alone. It was quite safe, going on its journey—towards some great good.

The back door, just across the little basement hall, scooped inwards across the oilcloth, jingling its little bell, and was banged to. The flouter-*crack* of a raincloak smartly shaken out was followed by a gentle scrabbling in a shoe-box,—the earliest girl, peaceful and calm, a wonderful sort of girl, coming into the empty basement quietly getting off her things, with all the rabble of the school coming along the roads, behind. The jingling door was pushed open again just as her slippered feet ran upstairs. “Khoo—what a filthy day!” said a vibrating hard mature voice. Miriam glanced at her time-table, history—dictation—geography—sums—writing—and shrank to her utmost air of preoccupation lest either of the elder girls should look in.

Sounds increased in the little hall, loud abrupt voices, short rallying laughs, the stubbing and stamping of feet on the oilcloth. At the expected rattling of the handle of her own door she crouched over her book. The door opened and was quietly closed again. A small figure

BACKWATER

flung itself forward. Miriam was clutched by harsh serge-clad arms. As she moved, startled, firm cracked lips were pressed against her cheekbone. "Good morning, Burra," she said, turning to put an arm round the child. She caught a glimpse of broad cheeks bulging firmly against a dark bush of short hair. Large fierce bloodshot eyes glared close to her own. "Hoo—angel." The little gasping body stiffened against her shoulder, pinning down her arm. The crimson face tried to reach her breast. "Have you changed your boots," said Miriam coldly. "Hoo—hoo." The short hard fingers hurt her. "Go and get them off at once." Head down Burra rushed at the door, colliding with the incoming figure of a neat little girl dressed in velvet-trimmed red merino, with a rose and white face and short gentle gold hair. She put a little pile of books on the table and stood still near to Miriam, with her hands behind her. They both looked down the room out of the window, with quiet unsmiling faces. "What have you been doing since Friday, Gertie?" Miriam said presently. "We went for a walk," said Gertie in a neat liquid little voice, dimpling and faintly raising her eyebrows.

PILGRIMAGE

The eight little girls who made up the upper class of the junior school stood in a close row as near as possible to Miriam's chair at the head of the table. They were silent and fresh and eagerly crowded, waiting for her to begin. She kept them silent for a few moments for the pleasure of having them there with her. She knew that Miss Perne, sitting in the window space with the youngest class drawn up in a half-circle for their Scripture lesson, was an approving presence, keeping her own little class at a level of quiet question and answer that made a background rather than a disturbance for the adventure of the elder girls. "Not too close together," said Miriam at last, gathering herself with a deep breath; "throw back your shoulders and stand straight. Don't lump down on your heels. Let your weight come on the ball of your feet. Are you all all right? Don't poke your heads forward." As the girls eagerly manœuvred themselves, wilfully carrying out her instructions even to turning their heads to face the opposite wall, she caught most of the eyes in turn smiling their eager affectionate conspiracy, and restraining her desire to get up then and there and clasp the little figures one by one, began the lesson. Four of the girls, two square-

BACKWATER

built Quakeresses with straight brown frocks, deep slow voices and dreamy eyes, a white-faced, tawny-haired, thin child with an eager stammer, and a brilliant little Jewess knew the "principal facts and dates" of the reign of Edward I by rote backwards and forwards in response to any form of question. Burra hung her head and knew nothing. Beadie Featherwell, dreadfully tall, a head taller, with her twelve years, than the tallest child in the lower school, knew no more than Burra and stood staring at the wall and biting her lips. A stout child with open mouth and snoring breath answered with perfect exactitude from the book, but her answers bore no relationship to the questions, and Gertie could only pipe replies if the questions were so put as to contain part of the answer. The white-faced girl was beginning to gnaw her fingers by the time the questioning was at an end.

"Well now, what is the difficulty," said Miriam, "of getting hold of the events of this queer little reign?" Everybody laughed and was silent again at once because Miriam's voice went on, trying to interest both herself and the successful girls in inventing ways of remembering all the things that had to be "hooked on to the word Ed-

PILGRIMAGE

ward." In less than ten minutes even the stout snoring girl could repeat the reign successfully, and for the remainder of their time they talked aimlessly.

The children standing at ease, saying whatever occurred to them, even the snoring girl secured from ridicule by Miriam's consideration of whatever was offered. Their adventure took them away from their subject into what Miriam knew "clever" people would call "side issues." "Nothing is a side issue," she told herself passionately with her eyes on the green glare beyond the window. The breaking up of Miss Perne's class left the whole of the lower school on her hands for the rest of the morning.

2

By half-past twelve she was sitting alone and exhausted with aching throat at her place at the head of the table.

"Khoo, *isn't* it a filthy day!" Polly Allen, a short heavy girl with a sallow pitted face, thin ill-nourished hair and kind swiftly moving grey eyes, marched in out of the dark hall with flapping bootlaces. In the bay she sat down and began to lace up her boots. The laces flicked

BACK WATER

carelessly upon the linoleum as she threaded, profaning the little sanctuary of the window space. "Oh me bones, me poor old bones," she muttered. "Eunice!" her hard mature voice vibrated through the room. "Eunice Dupont!"

"What's the jolly row?" said a slow voice at the door. "Wot's the bally shindy, beloved?"

"Like a really beautiful Cheshire cat," Miriam repeated to herself, propped studiously on her elbows shrinking, and hoping that if she did not look round, Eunice's carved brown curls, her gleaming slithering opaque oval eyes and her short upper lip, the strange evil carriage of her head, the wicked lines of her figure, would be withdrawn. "Cheshire, Cheshire," she scolded inwardly, feeling the pain in her throat increase.

"Nothing. Wait for me. That's all. Oh, my lungs, bones *and* et ceteras. It's old age, I suppose, Uncle William."

"Well, hurry your old age up, that's all. I'm ready."

"Well, don't go away, you funny cuckoo, you can wait, can't you?"

A party of girls straggled in one by one and drifted towards Polly in the window space.

"It's the parties I look forward to."

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh, look at her tie!"

"My tie? Six-three at Crisp's."

The sounds of Polly's bootlacing came to an end. She sat holding a court. "Doesn't look forward to parties? She must be a funny cuckoo!"

"Dancing's divine," said a smooth deep smiling voice. "Reversing. Khoo! with a fella. Khooo!"

"You surprise me, Edie. You do indeed. Hoh. Shocking."

"Shocking? Why? What do you mean, Poll?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Riang doo too."

"I don't think dancing's shocking. How can it be? You're barmy, my son."

"Ever heard of Lottie Collins?"

"Ssh. Don't be silly."

"I don't see what Lottie Collins has got to do with it. My mother thinks dancing's all right. That's good enough for me."

"Well—I'm not your mother."

"Nor anyone else's."

"Khoo, *Mabel*."

"Who wants to be anyone's mother?"

"Not me. Ug. Beastly little brats."

BACKWATER

"Oh shut *up*. Oh you *do* make me tired."

"Kids are jolly. A1. I hope I have lots."

Surprised into amazement, Miriam looked up to consult the face of Jessie Wheeler, the last speaker—a tall flat-figured girl with a strong squarish pale face, hollow cheeks, and firm colourless lips. Was it being a Baptist that made her have such an extraordinary idea? Miriam's eyes sought refuge from the defiant beam of her sea-blue eyes in the shimmering cloud of her hair. The strangest hair in the school; negroid in its intensity of fuzziness, but saved by its fine mesh.

"Don't you adore kiddies, Miss Henderson?"

"I think they're rather nice," said Miriam quickly, and returned to her book.

"I should jolly well think they were," said Jessie fervently.

"Hope your husband'll think so too, my dear," said Polly, getting up.

"Oh, of course, I should only have them if the fellow wanted me to."

"You haven't got a fella yet, madam."

"Of course not, cuckoo. But I shall."

"Plenty of time to think about that."

"Hoo. Fancy never having a fellow. I should go off my nut."

PILGRIMAGE

When they had all disappeared Miriam opened the windows. There was still someone moving about in the hall, and as she stood in the in-streaming current of damp air looking wearily at the concrete—a girl came into the room. “Can I come in a minute?” she said, advancing to the window. “I want to speak to you,” she pursued when she reached the bay. She stood at Miriam’s side and looked out of the window. Half-turning, Miriam had recognized Grace Broom, one of the elder first-class girls who attended only for a few subjects. She was a dark short-necked girl with thick shoulders; a receding mouth and boldly drawn nose and chin gave her a look of shrewd elderliness. The heavy mass of hair above the broad sweep of her forehead, her heavy frame and flat-footed walk added to this appearance. She wore a high-waisted black serge pinafore dress with black crape vest and sleeves.

“Do you mind me speaking to you?” she said in a hot voice. Her black-fringed brown eyes were fixed on the garden railings where people passed by and Miriam never looked.

“No,” said Miriam shyly.

“You know why we’re in mourning?”

BACKWATER

Miriam stood silent with beating heart, trying to cope with the increasing invasion.

"Our father's dead."

Hurriedly Miriam noted the superstitious tone in the voice. . . . This is a family that revels in plumes and hearses. She glanced at the stiff rather full crape sleeve nearest to her and sought about in her mind for help as she said with a blush, "Oh, I see."

"We've just moved."

"Oh yes, I see," said Miriam, glancing fearfully at the heavy scroll of profile and finding it expressive and confused.

"We've got a house about a quarter as big as where we used to live."

Miriam found it impossible to respond to this confession and still tried desperately to sweep away the sense of the figure so solidly planted at her side.

"I've asked our aunt if we can ask you to come to tea with us."

"Thank you very much," said Miriam in one word.

"When could you come?"

PILGRIMAGE

"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't come. It would be impossible."

"Oh no. You must come. I shall ask Aunt Lucy to write to Miss Perne."

"I really couldn't come. I shouldn't be able to ask you back."

"That doesn't matter," panted the relentless voice. "I've wanted to speak to you ever since you came."

3

When next Miriam saw the black-robed Brooms and their aunt file past the transept where were the Woodsworth House sittings, she felt that to visit them might perhaps not be the ordeal she had not dared to picture. It would be strange. Those three heavy black-dressed women. Their small new house. She imagined them sitting at tea in a little room. Why was Grace so determined that she should sit there too? Grace had a life and a home and was real. She did not know that things were awful. Nor did Florrie Broom, nor the aunt. But yet they did not look like 'social' people. They were a little different. Not worldly. Not pious either. Nor intellectual. What could they want with her? She

BACKWATER

had soon forgotten them and the congregation assumed its normal look. As the service went on the thoughts came that came every Sunday. An old woman with a girl at her side were the only people whose faces were within Miriam's line of vision from her place at the wall end of the Wordsworth House pew. The people in front of them were not even in profile, and those behind were hidden from her by the angle of the transept wall. To her right she could just see rising above the heads in the rows of pews in front of her the far end of the chancel screen. The faces grouped in the transept on the opposite side of the church were a blur. The two figures sat or knelt or stood in a heavy silence. They neither sang nor prayed. Their faces remained unaltered during the whole service. To Miriam they were its most intimate part. During the sermon she rarely raised her eyes from the circle they filled for her as they sat thrown into relief by the great white pillar. Their faces were turned towards the chancel. They could see its high dim roof and distant altar, the light on the altar, flowers, shining metal, embroideries, the maze of the east window, the white choir. They showed no sign of seeing these things. The old woman's heavy

PILGRIMAGE

face with its heavy jaw-bone seemed to have been dead for years under its coffin-shaped black bonnet. Her large body was covered by a mantle of thickly ribbed black material trimmed with braid and bugles. That bright yellow colour meant liver. Whatever she had she was dying of it. People were always dying when they looked like that. But it was a bad way to die. The real way was the way of that lady trailing about over the Heath near Rochampton, dying by inches of an internal complaint, with her face looking fragile—like the little alabaster chapelle in the nursery with a candle alight inside. She was going to die, walking about alone on the Heath in the afternoons. Her family going on as usual at home; the greengrocer calling. She knew that everybody was alone and that all the fuss and noise people made all day was a pretence. . . . What to *do*? To be walking about with a quiet face meeting death. Nothing could be so alone as that. The pain, and struggle, and darkness. . . . That was what the old woman feared. She did not think about death. She was afraid and sullen all the time. Stunned, sitting there with her cold common daughter. She had been common herself as a girl, but more noisy, and she had married and

BACKWATER

never thought about dying, and now she was dying and hating her cold daughter. The daughter, sitting there with her stiff slatey-blue coat and skirt, her indistinct hat tied with a thin harsh veil to her small flat head—what a home with her in it all the time. She would never laugh. Her poor-looking cheeks were yellowish, her fringe dry, without gloss. She would move her mouth when she spoke, sideways with a snarling curl of one-half of the upper lip and have that resentful way of speaking that all North Londoners have, and the maddening North London accent. The old woman's voice would be deep and hollow. . . . The girl moving heavily about the house wearing boots and stiff dresses and stiff stays showing their outline through her clothes. They would be bitter to their servant and would not trust her. What was the good of their being alive . . . a house and a water system and drains and cooking, and they would take all these things for granted and grumble and snarl . . . the gas meter man would call there. Did men like that resent calling at houses like that? No. They'd just say, "The ole party she sez to me." How good they were, these men. Good and kind and cheerful. Someone ought to prevent the extravagance of

PILGRIMAGE

keeping whole houses and fires going for women like that. They ought to be in an institution. But they never thought about that. They were satisfied with themselves. They were self-satisfied because they did not know what they were like. . . . *Why* should you have a house, and tradesmen calling?

"*Jehoiakin.*" The rush of indistinct expostulating sound coming from the pulpit was accompanied for a moment by reverberations of the one clearly bawled word. The sense of the large cold church, the great stone pillars, the long narrow windows faintly stained with yellowish green, the harsh North London congregation stirred and seemed to settle down more securely. She saw the form of the vicar in the light grey stone pulpit standing up short and neat against the cold grey stone wall, enveloped in fine soft folds, his small puckered hands beautifully cuffed, his plump crumpled little face, his small bald head fringed with little saffron-white curls, his pink pouched busy mouth. What was it all about? Pompous pottering, going on and on and on—in the Old Testament. The whole church was in the Old Testament. . . . *Honour* thy father and thy mother. How horribly the words would echo

BACKWATER

through the great cold church. *Why* honour thy father and thy mother? What had they done that was so honourable? Everybody was dying in cold secret fear. Christ, the son of God, was part of it all, the same family . . . vindictive. Christmas and Easter, hard white cold flowers, no real explanation. "I came not to destroy but to fulfil." The stagnant blood flushed in her face and tingled in her ears as the words occurred to her. Why didn't everybody die at once and stop it all?

4

Miss Haddie paused at the door of her room and wheeled suddenly round to face Miriam who had just reached the landing.

"You've not seen my little corner," she tweedled breathlessly, throwing open her door.

Miriam went in. "Oh how nice," she said fearfully, breathing in the freshness of a little square sun-filled muslin-draped blue-papered room. Taking refuge at the white-skirted window, she found a narrow view of the park, greener than the one she knew. The wide yellow pathway going up through the cricket ground had shifted away to the right.

PILGRIMAGE

"It's really a—a—a dressing-room from your room."

"Oh," said Miriam vivaciously.

"There's a door, a—a—a door. I daresay you've noticed."

"Oh! *That's* the door in our cupboard!" The dim door behind the hanging garments led to nothing but to Miss Haddie's room. She began unbuttoning her gloves.

Miss Haddie was hesitating near a cupboard, making little sounds.

"I suppose we must all make ourselves tidy now," said Miriam.

"I thought you didn't look very happy in church this morning," cluttered Miss Haddie rapidly.

Miriam felt heavy with anger. "Oh," she said clumsily, "I had the most frightful headache."

"Poor child. I thought ye didn't look yerself."

The window was shut. But the room was mysteriously fresh, far away from the school. A fly was hovering about the muslin window blind with little reedy loops of song. The oboe . . . in the quintet, thought Miriam suddenly. "I don't know," she said, listening. The flies sang like this at home. She had heard them without knowing it. She moved in her place by the window. The

BACK WATER

fly swept up to the ceiling, wavering on a deep note like a tiny gong. . . . Hot sunny refined lawns, roses in bowls on summerhouse tea-tables, refined voices far away from the Caledonian Road.

"Flies don't *buzz*," she said passionately. "They don't *buzz*. Why do people say they buzz?" The pain pressing behind her temples slackened. In a moment it would be only a glow.

Miss Haddie stood with bent head, her face turning from side to side, with its sour hesitating smile, her large eyes darting their strange glances about the room.

"Won't you sit down a minute? They haven't sounded the first bell yet." Miriam sat down on the one little white-painted, cane-seated chair near the dressing-table. "Eh—eh," said Miss Haddie, beginning to unfasten her veil. "She doesn't approve of general conversation," thought Miriam. "She's a female. Oh well, she'll have to see I'm not."

"What gave you yer headache?"

"Oh well, I don't know. I suppose I was wondering what it was all about."

"I don't think I quite understand ye."

"Well, I mean—what that old gentleman was in such a state of mind about."

PILGRIMAGE

"D'ye mean Mr. La Trobe!"

"Yes. Why do you laugh?"

"I don't understand what ye mean."

Miriam watched Miss Haddie's thin fingers feeling for the pins in her black toque. "Of course not," she thought, looking at the unveiled shrivelled cheek. . . . "thirty-five years of being a lady."

"Oh, well," she sighed fiercely.

"What is it ye mean, my dear?"

—'couldn't make head or tail of a thing the old dodderer said'—no 'old boy,' no—these phrases would not do for Miss Haddie.

"I couldn't agree with *anything* he said."

Miss Haddie sat down on the edge of the little white bed burying her face in her hands and smoothing them up and down with a wiping movement.

"One can always criticise a sermon," she said reproachfully.

"Well, why not?"

"I mean to say ye *can*," said Miss Haddie from behind her fingers, "but, but ye shouldn't."

"You can't help it."

"Oh yes, ye can. If ye listen in the right spirit," gargled Miss Haddie hurriedly.

BACKWATER

"Oh, it isn't only the sermon, it's the whole thing," said Miriam, crimsoning.

"Ye mustn't think about the speaker," went on Miss Haddie in faint hurried rebuke. "That's wrong. That sets people running from church to church. You must attend your own parish church in the right spirit, let the preacher be who—who—what he may."

"Oh, but I think that's positively *dangerous*," said Miriam gravely. "It simply means leaving your mind open for whatever they choose to say. Like Rome."

"Eh, no—o—o," flared Miss Haddie, dropping her hands, "nonsense. Not like Rome at all."

"But it *is*. It's giving up your conscience."

"You're very determined," laughed Miss Haddie bitterly.

"I'm certainly not going to give my mind up to a parson for him to do what he likes with. That's what it is. That's what they do. I've seen it again and again. I've heard people talking about sermons," finished Miriam with vivacious intentness.

Miss Haddie sat very still with her hands once more pressed tightly against her face.

"Oh, my dear. This is a dreadful state of af-

PILGRIMAGE

fairs. I'm afraid you're all wrong. That's not it at all. If you listen only for the good, the good will come to you."

"But these men don't know. How should they? They don't agree amongst themselves."

"Oh, my dear, that is a very wrong attitude. How long have ye felt like this?"

"Oh, all my life," responded Miriam proudly.

"I'm very sorry, my dear."

"Ever since I can remember. Always."

There were ivory-backed brushes on the dressing-table. Miriam stared at them and let her eyes wander on to a framed picture of an agonised thorn-crowned head.

"Were you—have ye—eh—have ye been confirmed?"

"Oh yes."

"Did ye discuss any of your difficulties with yer vicar?"

"Not I. I knew his mind too well. Had heard him preach for years. He would have run round my questions. He wasn't capable of answering them. For instance, supposing I had asked him what I've *always* wanted to know. How can people, ordinary people, be expected to be like Christ, as they say, when they think Christ

BACKWATER

was supernatural? Of course, if he was supernatural it was easy enough for him to be as he was; if he was not supernatural, then there's nothing in the whole thing."

"My *dear* child! I'm dreadfully sorry ye feel like that. I'd no idea ye felt like that, poor child. I knew ye weren't quite happy always; I mean I've thought ye weren't quite happy in yer mind sometimes, but I'd no idea—eh, eh, have ye ever consulted anybody—anybody able to give ye advice?"

"There you are. That's exactly the whole thing! *Who* can one consult? There isn't anybody. The people who are qualified are the people who have the thing called faith, which means that they beg the whole question from the beginning."

"Eh—dear—me—Miriam—child!"

"Well, I'm made that way. How can I help it if faith seems to me just an abnormal condition of the mind with fanaticism at one end and agnosticism at the other?"

"My dear, ye believe in God?"

"Well, you see, I see things like this. On one side a prime cause with a certain object unknown to me, bringing humanity into being; on the other

PILGRIMAGE

side humanity, all more or less miserable, never having been consulted as to whether they wanted to come to life. If that is belief, a South Sea Islander could have it. But good people, people with faith, want me to believe that one day God sent a saviour to rescue the world from sin and that the world can never be grateful enough and must become as Christ. Well. If God made people he is responsible and ought to save them."

"What do yer parents think about yer ideas?"

"They don't know."

"Ye've never mentioned yer trouble to them?"

"I did ask Pater once when we were coming home from the Stabat Mater that question I've told you about."

"What did he say?"

"He couldn't answer. We were just by the gate. He said he thought it was a remarkably reasonable dilemma. He laughed."

"And ye've never had any discussion of these things with him?"

"No."

"Ye're an independent young woman," said Miss Haddie.

Miriam looked up. Miss Haddie was sitting on the edge of her bed. A faint pink flush on her

BACKWATER

cheeks made her eyes look almost blue. She was no longer frowning. 'I'm something new—a kind of different world. She is wondering. I must stick to my guns,' mused Miriam.

"I'll not ask ye," said Miss Haddie quietly and cheerfully, "to expect any help from yer fellow creatures since ye've such a poor opinion of them. But ye're not happy. Why not go straight to the source?"

Miriam waited. For a moment the sheen on Miss Haddie's silk sleeves had distracted her by becoming as gentle and unchallenging as the light on her mother's dresses when there were other people in the room. She had feared the leaping out of some emotional appeal. But Miss Haddie had a plan. Strange secret knowledge.

"I should like to ask ye a question."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'll put it in this way. While ye've watched the doings of yer fellow creatures ye've forgotten that the truth ye're seeking is a—a Person."

Miriam pondered.

"That's where ye ought to begin. And how about—what—what about—I fancy ye've been neglecting the—the means of grace. . . . I think

PILGRIMAGE

ye have." Miss Haddie rose and crossed the room to a little bookshelf at the head of her bed, talking happily on. 'Upright as a dart,' commented Miriam mentally, waiting for the fulfilment of the promise of Miss Haddie's cheerfulness. Against the straight lines of the wall-paper Miss Haddie showed as swaying slightly backwards from the waist as she moved.

The first bell rang and Miriam got up to go. Miss Haddie came forward with a small volume in her hands and held it out, standing close by her and keeping her own hold on the volume. "Ye'll find no argument in it. Not but I think a few sound arguments would do ye good. Give it a try. Don't be stiff-necked. Just read it and see." The smooth soft leather slipped altogether into Miriam's hands and she felt the passing contact of a cool small hand and noted a faint fine scent coming to her from Miss Haddie's person.

In her own room she found that the soft binding of the book had rounded corners and nothing on the cover but a small plain gold cross in the right-hand corner. She feasted her eyes on it as she took off her things. When the second bell rang she glanced inside the cover. "Preparation for Holy Communion." Hurriedly hiding it in

BACKWATER

her long drawer under a pile of linen, she ran to the door. Running back again she took it out and put it, together with her prayer book and hymn book, in the small top drawer.

5

The opportunity to use Miss Haddie's book came with Nancie's departure for a week-end visit. Beadie was in the deeps of her first sleep and the room seemed empty. The book lay open on her bed. She noted as she placed it there when she began preparing for bed that it was written by a bishop, a man she knew by name as being still alive. It struck her as extraordinary that a book should be printed and read while the author was alive, and she turned away with a feeling of shame from the idea of the bishop, still going about in his lawn sleeves and talking, while people read a book that he had written in his study. But it was very interesting to have the book to look at, because he probably knew about modern people with doubts and would not think about them as 'infidels'—'an honest agnostic has my sympathy,' he might say, and it was possible he did not believe in eternal punishment. If he did he would not have had his book printed

PILGRIMAGE

with rounded edges and that beautiful little cross . . . "Line upon Line" and the "Pilgrim's Progress" were not meant for modern minds. Archbishop Whateley had a "chaste and eloquent wit" and was a "great gardener." A witty archbishop fond of gardening was simply aggravating and silly.

Restraining her desire to hurry, Miriam completed her toilet and at last knelt down in her dressing-gown. Its pinked neck-frill fell heavily against her face as she leant over the bed. Tucking it into her neck she clasped her outstretched hands, leaving the book within the circle of her arms. The attitude seemed a little lacking in respect for the beautifully printed gilt-edged pages. Flattening her entwined hands between herself and the edge of the bed, she read very slowly that just as for worldly communion men cleanse and deck their bodies so for attendance at the Holy Feast must there be a cleansing and decking of the spirit. She knelt upright, feeling herself grow very grave. The cold air of the bedroom flowed round her carrying conviction. Then that dreadful feeling at early service, kneeling like a lump in the pew, too late to begin to be good, the exhausted moments by the altar rail—

BACKWATER

the challenging light on the shining brass rod, on the priest's ring and the golden lining of the cup, the curious bite of the wine in the throat—the sullen disappointed home-coming; all the strange failure was due to lack of preparation. She knelt for some moments, without thoughts, breathing in the cleansing air, sighing heavily at intervals. What she ought to do was clear. A certain time for preparation could be taken every night, kneeling up in bed with the gas out if Nancie were awake, and a specially long time on Saturday night. The decision took her back to her book. She read that no man can cleanse himself, but it is his part to examine his conscience and confess his sins with a prayer for cleansing grace.

The list of questions for self-examination as to sins past and present in thought, word, and deed brought back the sense of her body with its load of well-known memories. Could they be got rid of? She could cast them off, feel them sliding away like Christian's Burden. But was that all? Was it being reconciled with your brother to throw off ill-feeling without letting him know and telling him you were sorry for unkind deeds and words? Those you met would find out the

PILGRIMAGE

with rounded edges and that beautiful little cross . . . "Line upon Line" and the "Pilgrim's Progress" were not meant for modern minds. Archbishop Whateley had a "chaste and eloquent wit" and was a "great gardener." A witty archbishop fond of gardening was simply aggravating and silly.

Restraining her desire to hurry, Miriam completed her toilet and at last knelt down in her dressing-gown. Its pinked neck-frill fell heavily against her face as she leant over the bed. Tucking it into her neck she clasped her outstretched hands, leaving the book within the circle of her arms. The attitude seemed a little lacking in respect for the beautifully printed gilt-edged pages. Flattening her entwined hands between herself and the edge of the bed, she read very slowly that just as for worldly communion men cleanse and deck their bodies so for attendance at the Holy Feast must there be a cleansing and decking of the spirit. She knelt upright, feeling herself grow very grave. The cold air of the bedroom flowed round her carrying conviction. Then that dreadful feeling at early service, kneeling like a lump in the pew, too late to begin to be good, the exhausted moments by the altar rail—

BACKWATER

the challenging light on the shining brass rod, on the priest's ring and the golden lining of the cup, the curious bite of the wine in the throat—the sullen disappointed home-coming; all the strange failure was due to lack of preparation. She knelt for some moments, without thoughts, breathing in the cleansing air, sighing heavily at intervals. What she ought to do was clear. A certain time for preparation could be taken every night, kneeling up in bed with the gas out if Nancie were awake, and a specially long time on Saturday night. The decision took her back to her book. She read that no man can cleanse himself, but it is his part to examine his conscience and confess his sins with a prayer for cleansing grace.

The list of questions for self-examination as to sins past and present in thought, word, and deed brought back the sense of her body with its load of well-known memories. Could they be got rid of? She could cast them off, feel them sliding away like Christian's Burden. But was that all? Was it being reconciled with your brother to throw off ill-feeling without letting him know and telling him you were sorry for unkind deeds and words? Those you met would find out the

PILGRIMAGE

change; but all the others—those you had offended from your youth up—all your family? Write to them. A sense of a checking of the tide that had seemed to flow through her finger-tips came with this suggestion, and Miriam knelt heavily on the hard floor, feeling the weight of her well-known body. The wall-paper attracted her attention and the honeycomb pattern of the thick fringed white counterpane. She shut the little book and rose from her knees. Moving quickly about the room, she turned at random to her washhand basin and vigorously rewashed her hands in its soapy water. The Englishman, she reflected as she wasted the soap, puts a dirty shirt on a clean body, and the Frenchman a clean shirt on a dirty body.

CHAPTER V

I

MIRIAM felt very proud of tall Miss Perne when she met her in the hall at the beginning of her second term. Miss Perne had kissed her and held one of her hands in two small welcoming ones, talking in a gleeful voice. "Well, my dear," she said at the end of a little pause, "you'll have a clear evening. The gels do not return until to-morrow, so you'll be able to unpack and settle yerself in comfortably. Come and sit with us when ye've done. We'll have supper in the sitting-room. M'yes." Smiling and laughing she turned eagerly away. "Of course, Miss Perne," said Miriam in a loud wavering voice, arresting her, "I enjoyed my holidays; but I want to tell you how glad I am to be back here."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Perne hilariously, "we're all glad."

There was a little break in her voice, and

PILGRIMAGE

Miriam saw that she would have once more taken her in her arms.

"I like being here," she said hoarsely, looking down, and supported herself by putting two trembling fingers on the hall table. She was holding back from the gnawing of the despair that had made her sick with pain when she heard once more the jingle-jingle, plock-plock of the North London trams. This strong feeling of pride in Miss Perne was beating it down. "I'm very glad, my dear," responded Miss Perne in a quivering gleeful falsetto. 'If you can't have what you like you must like what you have,' said Miriam over and over to herself as she went with heavy feet up the four flights of stairs.

2

A candle was already burning in the empty bedroom. "I'm back. I'm back. It's all over," she gasped as she shut the door. "And a jolly good thing too. This is my place. I can keep myself here and cost nothing and not interfere with anybody. It's just as if I'd never been away. It'll always be like that now. Short holidays, gone in a minute, and then the long term. Getting out of touch with everything,

BACKWATER

things happening, knowing nothing about them, going home like a visitor, and people talking to you about things that are only theirs now and not wanting to hear about yours . . . not about the little real everyday things that give you an idea of anything but only the startling things that are not important. You have to think of them though to make people interested—awful, awful, awful, really only putting people further away afterwards when you've told the thing and their interest dies down and you can't think of anything else to say. 'Miss Perne's hair is *perfectly* black—as black as coal, and she's the eldest, just *fancy*.' Then everybody looks up. 'My room's downstairs, the room where I teach, is in the basement. Directly breakfast is over——'

" 'Basement? What a pity! Basement rooms are awfully bad,' and by the time you have stopped them exclaiming and are just going to begin, you see that they are fidgetting and thinking about something else." . . . Eve had listened a little; because she wanted to tell everything about her own place and had agreed that nobody really wanted to hear the details. . . . The landscapes from the windows of the big country house, all

PILGRIMAGE

like pictures by Leader, the stables and laundry, a "laundry-maid" who was sixty-five, the eldest pupil with seven muslin dresses in the summer and being scolded because she swelled out after two helpings of meat and two of pie and cream, and the youngest almost square in her little covert coat and with a square face and large blue eyes and the puppies who went out in a boat in Weston-super-Mare and were sea-sick. . . . Eve did not seem to mind the family being common. Eve was changing. "They are so jolly and strong. They enjoy life. They're like other people." . . . "D'you think that's jolly? Would you like to be like that—like other people?" "Rather. I mean to be." "Do you?" "Of course it can't be done all at once. But it's good for me to be there. It's awfully jolly to be in a house with no worry about money and plenty of jolly food. Mrs. Green is so strong and clever. She can do anything. She's good for me, she keeps me going." "Would you like to be like her?" "Of course. They're all so jolly—even when they're old. Her sister's forty and she's still pretty; not given up hope a bit." "*Eve!*"

Eve had listened; but not agreed about the teaching, about making the girls see how easy it

BACKWATER

was to get hold of the things and then letting them talk about other things. "I see how you do it, and I see why the girls obey you, of course." Funny. Eve thought it was hard and inhuman. That's what she really thought.

Two newly purchased lengths of spotted net veiling were lying at the top of her lightly packed trunk partly folded in uncrumpled tissue paper. She took the crisp dye-scented net very gently into her hands, getting, sitting alone on the floor by her trunk, the full satisfaction that had failed her in the shop with Harriett's surprise at her sudden desire flowing over the counter and infecting the charm of baskets full of cheap stockings and common bright-bordered handkerchiefs some of which had borders so narrow and faint as really hardly to show when they were scrunpled up. "Veiling, moddom? Yes, moddom," the assistant had retorted when she had asked for a veil. "Wot on *earth* fower?" . . . Without answering Harriett she had bought two. There was no need to have bought two. One could go back in the trunk as a store. They would be the beginning of gradually getting a 'suitable outfit,' 'things convenient for you.' She got up to put a veil in the little top drawer very carefully;

PILGRIMAGE

trying it across her face first. It almost obliterated her features in the dim candle-light. It would be the greatest comfort on winter walks, warm and like a rampart. 'You've no idea how warm it keeps you,' she could say if anybody said anything. She arranged her clothes very slowly and exactly in her half of the chest of drawers. "My appointments ought to be an influence in the room—until all my things are perfectly refined I shan't be able to influence the girls as I ought. I must begin it from now. At the end of the term I shall be stronger. From strength to strength." She wished she could go to bed at once and prepare for to-morrow lying alone in the dark with the trams going up and down outside as they would do night by night for the rest of her life.

3

The nine o'clock post brought a letter from Harriett. Miriam carried it upstairs after supper. Placing it unopened on a chair by the head of her bed under the gas bracket she tried to put away the warm dizzy feeling it brought her in an elaborate toilet that included the placing in readiness of everything she would need for the

BACKWATER

morning. When all was complete she was filled with a peace that promised to remain indefinitely as long as everything she had to do should be carried out with unhurried exactitude. It could be made to become the atmosphere of her life. It would come nearer and nearer and she would live more and more richly into it until she had grown like those women who were called blessed. . . . She looked about her. The plain room gave her encouragement. It became the scene of adventure. She tip-toed about it in her nightgown. All the world would come to her there. Flora knew. Flora was the same, sweeping the floors and going to bed in an ugly room with two other servants; but she was in it alone sometimes and knew. . . .

"One verse to-night will be enough." Opening her Bible at random she read, "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience." Eagerly closing the volume she knelt down smiling. "Oh do let tribulation work patience in me," she murmured, blushing, and got up staring gladly at the wall behind her bed. Shaking her pillow lengthwise against the ironwork head of the bed, she established herself with the bed-clothes neatly

PILGRIMAGE

arranged, sitting up to read Harriett's letter before turning out the gas:

"Toosday morning—You're not gone yet, old tooral-ooral, but I'm writing this because I know you'll feel blue this evening, to tell you not to. Becos, it's *no* time to Easter and becos here's a great piece of news. The last of the Neville Subscription Dances comes in the Easter holidays and *you're to come*. D'ye 'ear, Liza? Gerald says if you can't stump up he's going to get you a ticket, and anyhow you've got to come. You'll enjoy it just as much as you did the first and probably more, because most of the same people will be there. So Goodni'. Mind the lamp-post, Harry. P'S.—Heaps of love, old silly. You're just the same. It's no bally good pretending you're not."

Miriam felt her heart writhe in her breast. "Get thee behind me, Harry," she said, pushing the letter under the pillow and kneeling up to turn out the gas. When she lay down again her mind was rushing on by itself. . . .

4

Harry doesn't realise a bit how short holidays are. Easter—nothing. Just one dance and

BACKWATER

never seeing the people again. I was right just now. I was on the right track then. I must get back to that. It's no good giving way right or left; I must make a beginning of my own life. . . . I wish I had been called "Patience" and had thin features. . . . Adam Street, Adelphi. . . . "Now do you want to be dancing out there with one of those young fellows, my dear girl—No? That's a very good thing for me. I'm an old buffer who can't manage more than every other dance or so. But if you do me the honour of sitting here while those young barbarians romp their Lancers? . . . Ah, that is excellent—I want you to talk to me. You needn't mind me. Hey? What? I've known that young would-be brother-in-law of yours for many years and this evening I've been watching your face. Do you mind that, dear girl, that I've watched your face? In all homage. I'm a staunch worshipper of womanhood. I've seen rough life as well as suave. I'm an old gold-digger—Ustralia took many years of my life; but it never robbed me of my homage for women. . . .

"That's a mystery to me. How you've allowed your young sister to overhaul you. Perhaps you have a Corydon hidden away somewhere—or

PILGRIMAGE

don't think favourably of the bonds of matrimony? Is that it?

"You are not one to be easily happy. But that is no reason why you should say you pity anyone undertaking to pass through life at your side. Don't let your thoughts and ideas allow you to miss happiness. Women are made to find and dispense happiness. Even intense women like yourself. But you won't find it an easy matter to discover your mate.

"Have you ever thought of committing your ideas to paper? There's a book called 'The Confessions of a Woman.' It had a great sale and its composition occupied the authoress for only six weeks. You could write in your holidays.

"Think over what I've told you, my dear, dear girl. And don't forget old Bob Greville's address. You're eighteen. He's only eight; eight Adam Street. The old Adam. Waiting to hear from the new Eve—whenever she's unhappy."

He would be there again, old flatterer, with his steely blue eyes and that strong little Dr. Conelly—Conelly who held you like a vice and swung you round and kept putting you back from him to say things. "If only

BACKWATER

you knew the refreshment it is to dance with a girl who can talk sense and doesn't *giggle*. . . . Yes yes yes, women are *physically* incapable of keeping a secret. . . . Meredith, he's the man. He understands woman as no other writer——" And the little dark man—De Vigne—who danced like a snake. . . . Tired? Divinely drowsy? That's what I like. Don't talk. Let yourself go. Little snail, Harriett called him. And that giant, Conelly's friend, whirling you round the room like a gust, with his eyes fixed far away in the distance and dropping you with the chaperones at the end of the dance. If *he* had suddenly said "Let yourself go" . . . He too would have become a snail. God has made life ugly.

Dear Mr. Greville, dear *Bob*. Do you know anything about a writer called Meredith? If you have one of his books I should like to read it. No. Dear Bob, I'm simply wretched. I want to talk to you.

5

Footsteps sounded on the stairs—the servants, coming upstairs to bed. No dancing for them. Work, caps and aprons. And those strange

PILGRIMAGE

rooms upstairs to sleep in that nobody ever saw. Probably Miss Perne went up occasionally to look at them and see that they were all right; clean and tidy. . . . They had to go up every night, carrying little jugs of water and making no noise on the stairs, and come down every morning. They were the servants—and there would never be any dancing. Nobody thought about them. . . . They could not get away from each other, and cook. . . .

To be a general servant would be very hard work. Perhaps impossible. But there would be two rooms, the kitchen at the bottom of the house, and a bedroom at the top, your own. It would not matter what the family was like. You would look after them, like children, and be alone to read and sleep. . . . Toothache. Cheap dentists; a red lamp "painless extractions" . . . having to go there before nine in the morning, and be alone in a cold room, the dentist doing what he thought best and coming back to your work crying with pain, your head wrapped up in a black shawl. Hospitals; being quite helpless and grateful for wrong treatment; coming back to work, ill. Sinks and slops . . . quinsey, all alone . . . growths . . . consumption.

BACKWATER

Go to sleep. It would be better to think in the morning. But then this clear first impression would be gone and school would begin and go on from hour to hour through the term, mornings and afternoons and evenings, dragging you along further and further and changing you, months and months and years until it was too late to get back and there was nothing ahead.

The thing to remember, to keep in mind all the time was to save money—not to spend a single penny that could be saved, to be determined about that so that when the temptation came you could just hang on until it was past.

No fun in the holidays, no money spent on flowers and gloves and blouses. Keeping stiff and sensible all the time. The family of the two little Quaker girls had a home library, with lists, an inventory, lending each other their books and talking about them, and albums of pressed leaves and flowers with the Latin names, and went on wearing the same plain clothes. . . . You had to be a certain sort of person to do that.

It would spoil the holidays to be like that at home. Every penny must be spent, if only on things for other people. Not spending would

PILGRIMAGE

bring a nice strong secret feeling and a horrid expression into one's eyes.

The only way was to give up your family and stay at your work, like Flora, and have a box of half-crowns in your drawer. . . . Spend and always be afraid of "rainy days"—or save and never enjoy life at all.

But going out now and again in the holidays, feeling stiff and governessy and just beginning to learn to be oneself again when it was time to go back was not enjoying life . . . your money was spent and people forgot you and you forgot them and went back to your convent to begin again.

Save, save. Sooner or later saving must begin. Why not at once? Harry, it's no good. I'm old already. I've got to be one of those who have to give everything up.

I wonder if Flora is asleep?

That's settled. Go to sleep. Get thee behind me. Sleep . . . the dark cool room. Air; we breathe it in and it keeps us alive. Everybody has air. Manna. As much as you want, full measure, pressed down and running over. . . . Wonderful. There is somebody giving things, whatever goes . . . something left. . . . Some-

BACKWATER

body seeing that things are not quite unbearable,
. . . but the pain, the pain all the time, mysterious black pain. . . .

Into thy hands I commit my spirit. *In manus*
something. . . . You understand if nobody else
does. But *why* must I be one of the ones to give
everything up? *Why* do you make me suffer so?

CHAPTER VI

I

PIECEMEAL statements in her letter home brought Miriam now and again a momentary sense of developing activities, but she did not recognise the completeness of the change in her position at the school until half-way through her second term she found herself talking to the new pupil teacher. She had heard apathetically of her existence during supper-table conversations with the Misses Perne at the beginning of the term. She was an Irish girl of sixteen, one of a large family living on the outskirts of Dublin, and would be a boarder, attending the first class for English and earning pocket money by helping with the lower school. As the weeks went on and Miriam grew accustomed to hearing her name—Julia Doyle—she began to associate it with an idea of charm that brought her a sinking of heart. She knew her position in the esteem of the Pernes was secure. But this new young

BACKWATER

teacher would work strange miracles with the girls. She would do it quite easily and unconsciously. The girls would be easy with her and would laugh and one would have to hear them.

However, when at last her arrival was near and the three ladies discussed the difficulty of having her met, Miriam plied them until they reluctantly gave her permission to go, taking a workman's train that would bring her to Euston station at seven o'clock in the morning.

At the end of an hour spent pacing the half-dark platform exhausted with cold and excitement and the monotonously reiterated effort to imagine the arrival of one of Mrs. Hungerford's heroines from a train journey, Miriam, whose costume had been described in a letter to the girl's mother, was startled wandering amidst the vociferous passengers at the luggage end of the newly arrived train by a liquid colourless intimate voice at her elbow. "I think I'll be right to say how d'you do."

She turned and saw a slender girl in a middle-aged toque and an ill-cut old-fashioned coat and skirt. What were they to say to each other, two dowdy struggling women both in the same

PILGRIMAGE

box? She must get her to Banbury Park as quickly as possible. It was dreadful that they should be seen together there on the platform in their rag-bag clothes. At any rate they must not talk. "Oh, I'm very pleased to see you. I'm glad you've come. I suppose the train must have been late," she said eagerly.

"Ah, we'll be late I dare venture. Haven't an idea of the hour."

"Oh, yes," said Miriam emphatically, "I'm sure the train's *late*."

"Where'll we find a core?"

"What?"

"We'll need a core for the luggage."

"Oh yes, a cab. We must get a cab. We'd better find a porter."

"Ah, I've a man here seeking out my things."

Inside the cab Julia's face shone chalky white, and Miriam found that her eyes looked like Weymouth Bay—the sea in general, on days when clouds keep sweeping across the sun. When she laughed she had dimples and the thick white rims of her eyelids looked like piping cord round her eyes. But she was not pretty. There were lines in her cheeks as well as dimples, and there

BACKWATER

was something apologetic in her little gusty laugh. She laughed a good deal as they started off, saying things, little quiet remarks that Miriam could not understand and that did not seem to be answers to her efforts to make conversation. Perhaps she was not going the right way to make her talk. Perhaps she had not said any of the things she thought she had said.

She cleared her throat and looked out of the window thinking over a possible opening.

"I've never been so glad over anything in my life as hearing you're one of the teachers," said Julia presently.

"The Pernes call me by my name, so I suppose you will too as you're a teacher," said Miriam headlong.

"That's awfully sweet of you," replied Julia, laughing and blushing a clear deep rose. "It makes anyone feel at home. I'll be looking out till I hear it."

"It's——" Miriam laughed. "Isn't it funny that people don't like saying their own names?"

"I wish you'd tell me about your teaching. I'm sure you're awf'ly clever."

Miriam gave her a list of the subjects she taught in the lower school.

PILGRIMAGE ,

"You know all there is to know."

"Oh well, and then I take the top girls now for German and the second class for French reading, and two arithmetic classes in the upper school, and a 'shell' of two very stupid girls to help with their College of Preceptors."

"You're frightening me."

2

Miriam looked out of the cab window, hardly hearing Julia's next remark. The drab brick walls of King's Cross station were coming towards them. When they had got themselves and Julia's luggage out of the cab and into the train for Banbury Park she was still pondering uneasily over her own dislike of appearing as a successful teacher. This stranger saw her only as a teacher. That was what she had become. If she was really a teacher now, just that in life, it meant that she must decide at once whether she really meant to teach always. Everyone now would think of her as a teacher; as someone who was never going to do anything else, when really she had not even begun to think about doing any of the things that professional teachers had to do. She was not qualifying herself for examinations in her spare

BACKWATER

time as her predecessor had done. Supposing she did. This girl Julia would certainly expect her to be doing so. What then? If she were to work very hard and also develop her character, when she was fifty she would be like Miss Cramp; good enough to be a special visiting teacher, giving just a few lectures a week at several schools, talking in a sad voice, feeling ill and sad, having a yellow face and faded hair and not enough saved to live on when she was too old to work. Prospect, said the noisy train. That was it, there was no prospect in it. There was no prospect in teaching. What was there a prospect in, going along in this North London train with this girl who took her at her word?

She turned eagerly to Julia who was saying something and laughing unconcernedly as she said it. "If you'd like to know what it is I've come over for I'll tell you at once. I've come over to learn Chopang's Funeral March. It's all I think about. When I can play Chopang's Funeral March I'll not call the Queen me aunt."

3

"Well, my dear child, I'm sure I wish I could arrange your life for ye," said Miss Haddie that

PILGRIMAGE :

evening. She was sitting on the edge of the schoolroom table, having come in at ten o'clock to turn out the gas and found Miriam sitting unoccupied. The room was cold and close with the long-burning gas, and Miriam had turned upon her with a scornful half laugh when she had playfully exclaimed at finding her there so late. Miss Haddie was obviously still a little excited. She had presided at schoolroom tea and Julia had filled the room with Dublin—the bay, the streets, the jarveys and their outside cars, her journey, the channel boat, her surprise at England.

“Eh, what's the matter, Miriam, my dear?” For some time Miriam had parried her questions, fiercely demanding that her mood should be understood without a clue. Presently they had slid into an irritated discussion of the respective values of sleep before and sleep after midnight, in the midst of which Miriam had said savagely, “I wish to goodness I knew what to do about things.”

Miss Haddie's kindly desire gave her no relief. What did she mean but the hopelessness of imagining that anybody could do anything about anything. Nobody could ever understand what

BACKWATER

anyone else really wanted. Only some people were fortunate. Miss Haddie was one of the fortunate ones. She had her share in the school and many wealthy relatives and the very best kind of good clothes and a good deal of strange old-fashioned jewelry. And whatever happened there was money and her sisters and relatives to look after her without feeling it a burden because of the expense. And there she sat at the table looking at what she thought she could see in another person's life.

"If only one knew in the least what one *ought* to do," said Miriam crossly.

Miss Haddie began speaking in a halting murmur, and Miriam rushed on with flaming face. "I suppose I shall have to go on teaching all my life, and I can't think how on earth I'm going to do it. I don't see how I can work in the evenings, my eyes get so tired. If you don't get certificates there's no prospect. And even if I did my throat is simply agonies at the end of each morning."

"Eh! my dear child! I'm sorry to hear that. Why have ye taken to that? Is it something fresh?"

"Oh, no, my throat always used to get tired.

PILGRIMAGE

Mother's is the same. We can't either of us talk for ten minutes without feeling it. It's perfectly awful."

"But, my dear, oughtn't ye to see someone—have some advice? I mean ye ought to see a doctor."

Miriam glanced at Miss Haddie's concerned face and glanced away with a flash of hatred. "Oh no. I s'pose I shall manage."

"D'ye think yer wise—letting it go on?"

Miriam made no reply.

"Well now, my dear," said Miss Haddie, getting down off the table, "I think it's time ye went to bed."

"Phm," said Miriam impatiently, "I suppose it is."

Miss Haddie sat down again. "I wish I could help ye, my dear," she said gently.

"Oh, no one can do that," said Miriam in a hard voice.

"Oh yes," murmured Miss Haddie cheerfully, "there's One who can."

"Oh yes," said Miriam, tugging a thread out of the fraying edge of the table cover. "But it's practically impossible to discover what on earth they mean you to do."

BACKWATER

"N—ache, my dear," she said in an angry guttural, "ye're always led."

Miriam tugged at the thread and bit her lips.

"Why do ye suppose ye'll go on teaching all yer life? Perhaps ye'll marry."

"Oh no."

"Ye can't tell."

"Oh, I never shall—in any case now."

"Have ye quarrelled with him?"

"Oh, well, *him*," said Miriam roundly, digging a pencil point between the grainings of the table-cover. "It's *they*, I think, goodness knows, I don't know; it's so perfectly extraordinary."

"You're a very funny young lady."

"Well, I shan't marry *now* anyhow."

"Have ye refused somebody?"

"Oh well—there was someone—who went away—went to America—who was coming back to see me when he came back——"

"Yes, my dear?"

"Well, you see, he's handed in his checks."

"Eh, my dear—I don't understand," said Miss Haddie thwarted and frowning.

"Aw," said Miriam, jabbing the table, "kicked the bucket."

PILGRIMAGE

"My dear child, you use such strange language—I can't follow ye."

"Oh well, you see, he went to America. It was in New York. I heard about it in January. He caught that funny illness. You know. Influenza—and died."

"Eh, my poor dear child, I'm very sorry for ye. Ye *do* seem to have troubles."

"Ah well, yes, and then the queer thing is that he was really only the friend of my real friend. And it was my real friend who told me about it and gave me a message he sent me and didn't like it, of course. Naturally."

"Well *really*, Miriam," said Miss Haddie, blushing, with a little laugh half choked by a cough.

"Oh yes, then of course one meets people—at dances. It's appalling."

"I wish I understood ye, my dear."

"Oh well, it doesn't make any difference now. I shall hardly ever meet anybody now."

Miss Haddie pondered over the table with features that worked slightly as she made little murmuring sounds. "Eh no. Ye needn't think that. Ye shouldn't think like that. . . . Things

BACKWATER

happen sometimes . . . just when ye least expect it."

"Not to me."

"Oh, things will happen to ye—never fear. . . . Now, my dear child, trot along with ye off to bed."

Miriam braced herself against Miss Haddie's gentle shaking of her shoulders and the quiet kiss on her forehead that followed it.

4

The strengthening of her intimacy with Miss Haddie was the first of the many changes brought to Miriam by Julia Doyle. At the beginning of the spring term her two room mates were transferred to Julia's care. The two back rooms became a little hive of girls over which Julia seemed to preside. She handled them all easily. There was rollicking and laughter in the back bedrooms, but never any sign that the girls were "going too far," and their escapades were not allowed to reach across the landing. Her large front room was, Miriam realised as the term went on, being secretly and fiercely guarded by Julia.

The fabric of the days too had changed. All day—during the midday constitutional when she

PILGRIMAGE

often found Julia at her side walking in her curious springy lounging way and took the walk in a comforting silence resting her weary throat, during the evenings of study and the unemployed intervals of the long Sundays—Julia seemed to come between her and the girls. She mastered them all with her speech and laughter. Miriam felt that when they were all together she was always in some hidden way on the alert. She never jested with Miriam but when they were alone, and rarely then. Usually she addressed her in a low tone and as if half beside herself with some overpowering emotion. It was owing too to Julia's presence in the school that an unexpected freedom came to Miriam every day during the hour between afternoon school and tea-time.

Persuaded by the rapid increase towards the end of the winter term of the half-feverish exhaustion visiting her at the end of each day she had confided in her mother, who had wept at this suggestion of an attack on her health and called in the family doctor. "More air," he said testily, "air and movement." Miriam repeated this to Miss Perne, who at once arranged that she should

BACKWATER

be free if she chose to go out every afternoon between school and tea-time.

At first she went into the park every day. It was almost empty during the week at that hour. The cricket green was sparsely decked with children and their maids. A few strollers were left along the poplar avenue and round the asphalt-circled lake; but away on the further slopes usually avoided in the midday walks because the girls found them oppressive, Miriam discovered the solitary spring air. Day by day she went as if by appointment to meet it. It was the same wandering eloquent air she had known from the beginning of things. Whilst she walked along the little gravel pathways winding about over the clear green slopes in the flood of afternoon light it stayed with her. The day she had just passed through was touched by it; it added a warm promise to the hours that lay ahead—tea-time, the evening's reading, the possible visit of Miss Haddie, the quiet of her solitary room, the coming of sleep.

One day she left the pathways and strayed amongst pools of shadow lying under the great trees. As she approached the giant trunks and

PILGRIMAGE

the detail of their shape and colour grew clearer her breathing quickened. She felt her prim bearing about her like a cloak. The reality she had found was leaving her again. Looking up uneasily into the forest of leaves above her head she found them strange. She walked quickly back into the sunlight, gazing reproachfully at the trees. There they were as she had always known them; but between them and herself was her governess' veil, close drawn, holding them sternly away from her. The warm comforting communicative air was round her, but she could not recover its secret. She looked fearfully about her. To get away somewhere by herself every day would not be enough. If that was all she could have, there would come a time when there would be nothing anywhere. For a day or two she came out and walked feverishly about in other parts of the park, resentfully questioning the empty vistas. One afternoon, far away, but coming towards her as if in answer to her question, was the figure of a man walking quickly. For a moment her heart cried out to him. If he would come straight on and, understanding, would walk into her life and she could face things knowing that he was there, the light would come back and

BACKWATER

would stay until the end—and there would be other lives, on and on. She stood transfixed, trembling. He grew more and more distinct and she saw a handbag and the outline of a bowler hat; a North London clerk hurrying home to tea. With bent head she turned away and dragged her shamed heavy limbs rapidly towards home.

5

Early in May came a day of steady rain. Enveloped in a rain-cloak and sheltered under her lowered umbrella she ventured down the hill towards the shops. Near the railway arch the overshadowed street began to be crowded with jostling figures. People were pouring from the city trams at the terminus and coming out of the station entrance in a steady stream. Hard intent faces, clashing umbrellas, the harsh snarling monotone of the North London voice gave her the feeling of being an intruder. Everything seemed to wonder what she was doing down there instead of being at home in the schoolroom. A sudden angry eye above a coarse loudly talking mouth all but made her turn to go with instead of against the tide; but she pushed blindly on

PILGRIMAGE

and through and presently found herself in a quiet side street just off the station road looking into a shop window. . . . "1 lb. super cream-laid boudoir note—with envelopes—1s." Her eyes moved about the window from packet to packet, set askew and shining with freshness. If she had not brought so much note-paper from home she could have bought some. Perhaps she could buy a packet as a Christmas present for Eve and have it in her top drawer all the time. But there was plenty of note-paper at home. She half turned to go, and turning back fastened herself more closely against the window meaninglessly reading the inscription on each packet. Standing back at last she still lingered. A little blue-painted tin plate sticking out from the side of the window announced in white letters "Carter Paterson." Miriam dimly wondered at the connection. Underneath it hung a card-board printed in ink, "Circulating Library, 2d. weekly." This was still more mysterious. She timidly approached the door and met the large pleasant eye of a man standing back in the doorway.

"Is there a library here?" she said with beating heart.

BACKWATER

She stood so long reading and re-reading half familiar titles, "Cometh up as a Flower," "Not like other Girls," "The Heir of Redcliffe," books that she and Harriett had read and books that she felt were of a similar type, that tea was already on the schoolroom table when she reached Wordsworth House with an unknown volume by Mrs. Hungerford under her arm. Hiding it upstairs, she came down to tea and sat recovering her composure over her paper-covered "Cinq Mars," a relic of the senior Oxford examination now grown suddenly rich and amazing. To-day it could not hold her. "The Madcap" was upstairs, and beyond it an unlimited supply of twopenny volumes and Ouida. Red-bound volumes of Ouida on the bottom shelf had sent her eyes quickly back to the safety of the upper rows. Through the whole of tea-time she was quietly aware of a discussion going on at the back of her mind as to who it was who had told her that Ouida's books were bad; evil books. She remembered her father's voice saying that Ouida was an extremely able woman, quite a politician. Then of course her books were all right, for grown-up people. It must have been someone at a dance who had made her curious about them, someone she had

PILGRIMAGE

forgotten. In any case, whatever they were, there was no one now to prevent her reading them if she chose. She would read them if she chose. Write to Eve about it first. No. Certainly not. Eve might say "Better not, my dear. You will regret it if you do. You won't be the same." Eve was different. She must not be led by Eve in any case. She must leave off being led by Eve—or anybody. The figures sitting round the table, bent over their books, quietly disinclined for conversation or mischief under the shrewd eye of Miss Haddie, suddenly looked exciting and mysterious. But perhaps the man in the shop would be shocked. It would be impossible to ask for them; unless she could pretend she did not know anything about them.

6

For the last six weeks of the summer term she sat up night after night propped against her upright pillow and bolster under the gas jet reading her twopenny books in her silent room. Almost every night she read until two o'clock. She felt at once that she was doing wrong; that the secret novel-reading was a thing she could not confess, even to Miss Haddie. She was spending hours of

BACKWATER

the time that was meant for sleep, for restful preparation for the next day's work, in a "vicious circle" of self-indulgence. It was sin. She had read somewhere that sin promises a satisfaction that it is unable to fulfil. But she found when the house was still and the trams had ceased jingling up and down outside that she grew steady and cool and that she rediscovered the self she had known at home, where the refuge of silence and books was always open. Perhaps that self, leaving others to do the practical things, erecting a little wall of unapproachability between herself and her family that she might be free to dream alone in corners had always been wrong. But it was herself, the nearest most intimate self she had known. And the discovery that it was not dead, that her six months in the German school and the nine long months during which Banbury Park life had drawn a veil even over the little slices of holiday freedom, had not even touched it, brought her warm moments of reassurance. It was not perhaps a "good" self, but it was herself, her own familiar secretly happy and rejoicing self—not dead. Her hands lying on the coverlet knew it. They were again at these moments her own old hands, holding very

PILGRIMAGE

firmly to things that no one might touch or even approach too nearly, things, everything, the great thing that would some day communicate itself to someone through these secret hands with the strangely thrilling finger-tips. Holding them up in the gaslight she dreamed over their wisdom. They knew everything and held their secret, even from her. She eyed them, communed with them, passionately trusted them. They were not "artistic" or "clever" hands. The fingers did not "taper" nor did the outstretched thumb curl back on itself like a frond—like Nan Babington's. They were long, the tips squarish and firmly padded, the palm square and bony and supple, and the large thumb joint stood away from the rest of the hand like the thumb joint of a man. The right hand was larger than the left, kindlier, friendlier, wiser. The expression of the left hand was less reassuring. It was a narrower, lighter hand, more flexible, less sensitive and more even in its touch—more smooth and manageable in playing scales. It seemed to belong to her much less than the right; but when the two were firmly interlocked they made a pleasant curious whole, the right clasping more firmly, its thumb always uppermost, its

BACKWATER

fingers separated firmly over the back of the left palm, the left hand clinging, its fingers close together against the hard knuckles of the right.

It was only when she was alone and in the intervals of quiet reading that she came into possession of her hands. With others they oppressed her by their size and their lack of feminine expressiveness. No one could fall in love with such hands. Loving her, someone might come to tolerate them. They were utterly unlike Eve's plump, white, inflexible little palms. But they were her strength. They came between her and the world of women. They would be her companions until the end. They would wither. But the bones would not change. The bones would be laid unchanged and wise, in her grave.

7

She began her readings with Rosa Nouchette Carey. Reading her at home, after tea by the breakfast-room fireside with red curtains drawn and the wind busy outside amongst the ever-green shrubs under the window, it had seemed quite possible that life might suddenly develop into the thing the writer described. From some-

PILGRIMAGE

where would come an adoring man who believed in heaven and eternal life. One would grow very good; and after the excitement and interest had worn off one would go on, with firm happy lips being good and going to church and making happy matches for other girls or quietly disapproving of everybody who did not believe just in the same way and think about good girls and happy marriages and heaven, keeping such people outside. Smiling, wise and happy inside in the warm; growing older, but that did not matter because the adored man was growing older too.

Now it had all changed. The quiet house and fireside, gravity, responsibility, a greying husband, his reading profile always dear, both of them going on towards heaven, "all tears wiped away," tears and laughter of relief after death, still seemed desirable, but "women." . . . Those awful, awful women, she murmured to herself, stirring in bed. I never thought of all the *awful* women there would be in such a life. I only thought of myself and the house and the garden and the man. What an escape! Good God in heaven, what an escape! Far better to be alone

BACKWATER

and suffering and miserable here in the school, alive. . . .

Then there'll be whole heaps of books, millions of books I can't read—perhaps nearly all the books. She took one more volume of Rosa, in hope, and haunted its deeps of domesticity. "I've gone too far." . . . If Rosa Nouchette Carey knew me, she'd make me one of the bad characters who are turned out of the happy homes. I'm some sort of bad unsimple woman. Oh, damn, damn, she sighed. I don't know. Her hands seemed to mock her, barring her way.

8

Then came a series of Mrs. Hungerford—all the volumes she had not already read. She read them eagerly, inspirited. The gabled country houses, the sunlit twilit endless gardens, the deep orchards, the falling of dew, the mists of the summer mornings, masses of flowers in large rooms with carved oaken furniture, wide staircases with huge painted windows throwing down strange patches of light on shallow thickly carpeted stairs. These were the things she wanted;

PILGRIMAGE

gay house-parties, people with beautiful wavering complexions and masses of shimmering hair catching the light, fragrant filmy diaphanous dresses; these were the people to whom she belonged—a year or two of life like that, dancing and singing in and out the houses and gardens; and then marriage. Living alone, sadly estranged, in the house of a husband who loved her and with whom she was in love, both of them thinking that the other had married because they had lost their way in a thunderstorm and spent the night sitting up on a mountain-top or because of a clause in a will, and then one day both finding out the truth. . . . That is what is meant by happiness . . . happiness. But these things could only happen to people with money. She would never have even the smallest share of that sort of life. She might get into it as a governess—some of Mrs. Hungerford's heroines were governesses—but they had clouds of hair and were pathetically slender and appealing in their deep mourning. She read volume after volume, forgetting the titles—the single word 'Hungerford' on a cover inflamed her. Her days became an irrelevance and her evenings a dreamy sunlit indulgence. Now and again she wondered what Julia

BACKWATER

Doyle would think if she knew what she was reading and how it affected her—whether she would still watch her in the way she did as she went about her work pale and tired, whether she would go on guarding her so fiercely?

9

At last exasperated, tired of the mocking park, the mocking happy books, she went one day to the lower shelf, and saying very calmly, "I think I'll take a Ouida," drew out "Under Two Flags" with a trembling hand. The brown-eyed man seemed to take an interminable time noting the number of the book, and when at last she got into the air her limbs were heavy with sadness. That night she read until three o'clock and finished the volume the next night at the same hour, sitting upright when the last word was read, refreshed. From that moment the red-bound volumes became the centre of her life. She read "Moths" and "In Maremma" slowly word by word, with an increasing steadiness and certainty. The mere sitting with the text held before her eyes gave her the feeling of being strongly confronted. The strange currents which came whenever she was alone and at ease flowing to the tips

PILGRIMAGE

of her fingers, seemed to flow into the book as she held it and to be met and satisfied. As soon as the door was shut and the gas alight, she would take the precious, solid trusty volume from her drawer and fling it on her bed, to have it under her eyes while she undressed. She ceased to read her Bible and to pray. Ouida, Ouida, she would muse with the book at last in her hands. I want bad things—strong bad things. . . . It doesn't matter, Italy, the sky, bright hot landscapes, things happening. I don't care what people think or say. I am older than anyone here in this house. I am myself.

10

. . . If you had loved, if you loved, you could die, laughing, gasping out your life on a battlefield, fading by inches in a fever-swamp, or living on, going about seamed and old and ill. Whatever happened to you, if you had cared, fearing nothing, neither death nor hell. God came. He would welcome and forgive you. Life, struggle, pain. Happy laughter with twisted lips—all waiting somewhere outside, beyond. It would come. It must be made to come.

BACKWATER

11

Who was there in the world? Ted had failed. Ted belonged to the Rosa Nouchette Carey world. He would marry one of those women. Bob knew. Bob Greville's profile was real. Sitting on the wide stairs at the Easter Subscription Dance, his soft fine white hair standing up, the straight line of polished forehead, the fine nose and compressed lips, the sharp round chin with the three firm folds underneath it, the point of his collar cutting across them, the keen blue eyes looking straight out ahead, across Australia. The whole face listening. He had been listening to her nearly all the evening. Now and again quiet questions. She could go on talking to him whenever she liked. Go to him and go on talking, and talking, safely, being understood. Talking on and on. But he was old. Living old and alone in chambers in Adam Street—Adelphi.

12

One day just before the end of the summer term, Miss Perne asked Miriam to preside over the large schoolroom for the morning. The first and second-class girls were settled there at their

PILGRIMAGE

written examination in English history. Rounding the schoolroom door she stood for a moment in the doorway. The sunlight poured in through the wide bay window and the roomful of quiet girls seemed like a field. Jessie Wheeler's voice broke the silence. "It's the Hen," she shouted gently. "It's the blessed Hen! Oh, *come* on. You going to sit with us?"

"Yes. Be quiet," said Miriam.

"Oh, thank goodness," groaned Jessie, supported by groans and murmurs from all over the room.

"Be quiet, girls, and get on with your papers," said Miriam in a tone of acid detachment from the top of her tide. She sat feeling that her arms were round the entire roomful, that each girl struggling alone with the list of questions was resting against her breast. "I'm going away from them. I must be going away from them," ran her thoughts regretfully. "They can't keep me. This is the utmost. I've won. There'll never be anything more than this, here. It would always be the same—with different girls. Certainty. Even the sunlight paid a sort of homage to the fathomless certainty she felt. The sunlight in this little schoolroom was telling her of

BACKWATER

other sunlights, vast and unbroken, somewhere—coming, her own sunlights, when she should have wrenched herself away. It was there; she glanced up again and again to watch it breaking and splashing all over the room. It would come again, but how differently. Quite soon. She might have spared herself all her agonising. The girls did not know where she belonged. They were holding her. But she would go away, to some huge open space. Leave them—ah, it was unkind. But she had left them already in spirit.

If they could all get up together now and sing, let their voices peal together up and up, throw all the books out of the window, they might go on together, forward into the sunshine, but they would not want to do that. Hardly any of them would want to do that. They would look at her with knowing eyes, and look at the door, and stay where they were.

The room was very close. Polly Allen and Eunice Dupont, sitting together at a little card-table in the darkest corner of the room, were whispering. With beating heart Miriam got up and went and stood before them. "You two are talking," she said with her eyes on the thickness of Polly's shoulders as she sat in profile to

PILGRIMAGE

the room. Eunice, opposite her, against the wall, flashed up at her her beautiful fugitive grin as from the darkness of a wood. History, thought Miriam. What has Eunice to do with history, laws, Henry II, the English Constitution? "You don't talk," she said coldly, feeling as she watched her that Eunice's pretty clothes were stripped away and she were stabbing at her soft rounded body, "at examinations. Can't you see that?" Eunice's pale face grew livid. "First because it isn't fair and also because it disturbs other people." You can tell all the people who cheat by their smile, she reflected on her way back. Eunice chuckled serenely two or three times. "What have these North London girls to do with studies?" . . . There was not a single girl like Eunice at Barnes. Even the very pretty girls were . . . refined.

13

That afternoon Miriam spent her hour of leisure in calling on the Brooms to enquire for Grace, who had been ill the whole of the term. She found the house after some difficulty in one of a maze of little rows and crescents just off the tram-filled main road. "She's almost perfect—almost

BACKWATER

perfection," said Mrs. Philps, the Aunt Lucy Miriam had heard of and seen in church.

They had been together in the little drawing-room talking about Grace from the moment when Miriam was shown in to Mrs. Philps sitting darning a duster in a low chair by the closed conservatory door. The glazed closed door with the little strips of window on either side giving on to a crowded conservatory made the little room seem dark. To Miriam it seemed horribly remote. Her journey to it had been through immense distances. Threading the little sapling-planted asphalt-pavemented roadways between houses whose unbroken frontage was so near and so bare as to forbid scrutiny, she felt she had reached the centre, the home and secret of North London life. Off every tram-haunted main road, there must be a neighbourhood like this where lived the common-mouthed harsh-speaking people who filled the pavements and shops and walked in the parks. To enter one of the little houses and speak there to its inmates would be to be finally claimed and infected by the life these people lived, the thing that made them what they were. At Wordsworth House she was held up by the presence of the

PILGRIMAGE

Pernes and Julia Doyle. Here she was helpless and alone. When she had discovered the number she sought and, crossing the little tiled pathway separated from the pathway next door by a single iron rail, had knocked with the lacquered knocker against the glazed and leaded door, her dreams for the future faded. They would never be realised. They were just a part of the radiance that shone now from the spacious houses she had lived in in the past. The things she had felt this morning in the examination room were that, too. They had nothing to do with the future. All the space was behind. Things would grow less and less.

14

Admitted to the dark narrowly echoing tiled passage, she stated her errand and was conducted past a closed door and the opening of a narrow staircase which shot steeply, carpeted with a narrow strip of surprisingly green velvet carpeting, up towards an unlit landing and admitted to Mrs. Philps.

"Wait a minute, Vashti," said Mrs. Philps, holding Miriam's hand as she murmured her errand. "You'll stay tea? Well, if you're sure

BACKWATER

you can't I'll not press you. Bring the biscuits and the sherry and two white wine-glasses, Vashti. Get them now and bring them in at once. Sit down, Miss Henderson. She's little better than a step-girl. They're all the same." Whilst she described her niece's illness, Miriam wondered over the immense bundle of little even black sausage-shaped rolls of hair which stuck out, larger than her head and smoothed to a sphere by a tightly drawn net, at the back of her skull. She was short and stout and had bright red cheeks that shone in the gloom and rather prominent large blue eyes that roamed as she talked, allowing Miriam to snatch occasional glimpses of china-filled what-nots and beaded ottomans. Presently Vashti returned clumsily with the wine, making a great bumping and rattling round about the door. "You stupid thing, you've brought claret. Don't you know sherry when you see it? It's at the back—behind the Harvest Burgundy." "I shall have to go soon," said Miriam, relieved at the sight of the red wine and longing to escape the sherry. Vashti put down the tray and stood with open mouth. Even with her very high heels she looked almost a dwarf. The room seemed less oppressive with the strange long-necked decanter

PILGRIMAGE

and the silver biscuit box standing on a table in the curious greenish light. Mrs. Philps accepted the claret and returned busily to her story, whilst Miriam sipped and glanced at a large print in a heavy black frame leaning forward low over the small white marble mantelpiece. It represented a young knight in armour kneeling at an altar with joined and pointed hands held to his lips. An angel standing in mid-air was touching his shoulder with a sword. "Why doesn't she kiss the top of his head," thought Miriam as she sipped her wine. The distant aisles and pillars of the church made the room seem larger than it was. "I suppose they all look into that church when they want to get away from each other," she mused as Mrs. Philps went on with her long sentences beginning "And Dr. Newman said—" And there was a little mirror above a bulging chiffonier which was also an escape from the confined space. Looking into it, she met Mrs. Philps's glowing face with the blue eyes widely staring and fixed upon her own, and heard her declare, with her bunched cherry-coloured lips, that Grace was 'almost perfection.' "Is she?" she responded eagerly and Mrs. Philps elaborated her theme. Grace, then, with her heavy body and strange hot

BACKWATER

voice, lying somewhere upstairs in a white bed, was the most important thing in this dark little house. "She was very near to death then," Mrs. Philps was saying tearfully, "very near, and when she came round from her delirium, one of the first things she said to me as soon as she was strong enough to whisper, was that she was perfectly certain about there being another life." Mrs. Philps's voice faded and she sat with trembling lips and eyes downcast. "*Did* she!" Miriam almost shouted, half-rising from her seat and turning from contemplating Mrs. Philps in the mirror to look her full in the face. The dim green light streaming in from the conservatory seemed like a tide that made everything in the room rock slightly. A touch would sweep it all away and heaven would be there all round them. "Did she," whispered Miriam in a faint voice that shook her chest. "'Aunt,' she said," went on Mrs. Philps steadily, as the room grew firm round Miriam and the breath she drew seemed like an early morning breath, "'I want to say something quickly,' she said, 'in case I die. It's that I know—for a positive fact, there is another life.'"

"What a perfectly stupendous thing," said Miriam. "It's so important."

PILGRIMAGE

"I was much impressed. Of course, I knew she was nearly perfect. But we've not been in the habit of talking about religion. I asked her if she would like to see the vicar. 'Oh no,' she said, 'there's no need. He knows.' I doubt if he knows as much as she does. But I didn't make a point of it."

"Oh, but it's simply wonderful. It's much more important than anything a vicar could say. It's their business to say those things."

"I don't know about that. But she was so weak that I didn't press it."

"But it's so important. What a wonderful thing to have in your family. Did she say anything more?"

"She hasn't returned to the subject again. She's very weak."

Wild clutching thoughts shook at Miriam. If only Grace could suddenly appear in her night-gown, to be questioned. Or if she herself could stay on there creeping humbly about in this little house, watering the conservatory and darning dusters, being a relative of the Brooms, devoting herself to Grace, waiting on her, hearing all she had to say. What did it matter that the Brooms wore heavy mourning and gloated over funerals

BACKWATER

if Grace upstairs in her room had really seen the
white light away in the distance far away beyond
the noise of the world?

CHAPTER VII

1

HARRIETT'S ringed fingers had finished dipping and drying the blue and white tea-service. She sat for a moment staring ahead down-stream. Sitting opposite her, Gerald watched her face with a half smile. Miriam waited sitting at her side. It was the first moment of silence since she had come home at midday. From the willow-curtained island against which they were moored came little crepitations and flittings. Ahead of them the river blazed gold and blue, hedged by high spacious trees. "*Come-to-tea, come-to-tea, hurry-up-dear,*" said a bird suddenly from the island thicket.

"D'you know what bird that is, Gerald?" asked Miriam.

"Not from Adam," breathed Gerald, swaying on his seat with a little laugh. "It's a bird. That's all I know."

"We'd better unmoor, silly," muttered Harriett briskly, gathering up the tiller ropes.

BACKWATER

"Right, la reine."

"Look here, let me do something this time, pull or something."

"You sit still, my dear."

"But I should simply love to."

"You shall pull down-stream if you like later on when the bally sun's down. My advice to you now is to go and lounge in the bow."

"Oh yes, Mim, you try it. Lie right down. It's simply heavenly."

The boat glided deliciously away up-stream as Miriam, relinquishing her vision of Harriett sitting very upright in the stern in her white drill dress, and Gerald's lawn-shirted back and long lean arms grasping the sculls, lay back on the bow cushions with her feet comfortably outstretched under the unoccupied seat in front of her. Six hours ago, shaking hands with a roomful of noisy home-going girls—and now nothing to do but float dreamily out through the gateway of her six weeks' holiday. The dust of the school was still upon her; the skin of her face felt strained and tired, her hands were tired and hot, her blouse dim with a week of school wear, and her black skirt oppressed her with its invisible burden of grime. But she was staring up

PILGRIMAGE

fastened with the plain heavy cable broach pinned in lengthwise half-way down the ends of the tie, which reached almost to her black belt. That was Gerald. Her shoes, the number of pairs of light, expensive, beautifully made shoes. Her bearing, the change in her voice, a sort of roundness about her old Harryish hardness. But she was the same Harry, the Harry he had seen for the first time snorting with anger over Mr. Marth's sentimental singing at the Assembly Rooms concert. "My hat, wasn't la reine fuming!" He would forgive her all her ignorance. It was her triumph. What an extraordinary time Harry would have. Gerald was well-off. He had a private income behind his Canadian Pacific salary. His grandfather had been a diplomatist, living abroad nearly all the time, and his wealthy father and wealthy mother with a large fortune of her own had lived in a large house in Chelsea, giving dinner parties and going to the opera until nearly all the capital had gone, both dying just in time to leave enough to bring Gerald in a small income when he left Haileybury. And the wonderful thing was that Gerald liked mouching about and giggling. He liked looking for hours in shop

BACK WATER

really beautiful people, like Nan Babington and her cousin. Everything they said sounding wonderful and seeming to improve the scenery; the jokes of the men, even Ted always joked all the time, the misery of large noisy picnic teas on the grass, and in the end great weariness and disappointment, the beauty of the river and the trees only appearing the next day or perhaps long afterwards.

This boat was Gerald's own private boat, a double-scuttling skiff, slender and gold-brown, beautifully fitted and with a locker containing everything that was wanted for picnicking. They had arranged their expedition at lunch-time, trained to Richmond, bought fruit and cakes and got the boat's water-keg filled by one of Redknap's men. Gerald knew how to do things properly. He had always been accustomed to things like this boat. He would not care to have anything just anyhow. "Let's do the thing decently, la reine." He would keep on saying that at intervals until Harriett had learned too. How he had changed her since Easter when their engagement had been openly allowed. The clothes he had bought for her, especially this plain drill dress with its neat little coat. The long black tie

PILGRIMAGE

fastened with the plain heavy cable broach pinned in lengthwise half-way down the ends of the tie, which reached almost to her black belt. That was Gerald. Her shoes, the number of pairs of light, expensive, beautifully made shoes. Her bearing, the change in her voice, a sort of roundness about her old Harryish hardness. But she was the same Harry, the Harry he had seen for the first time snorting with anger over Mr. Marth's sentimental singing at the Assembly Rooms concert. "My hat, wasn't la reine fuming!" He would forgive her all her ignorance. It was her triumph. What an extraordinary time Harry would have. Gerald was well-off. He had a private income behind his Canadian Pacific salary. His grandfather had been a diplomatist, living abroad nearly all the time, and his wealthy father and wealthy mother with a large fortune of her own had lived in a large house in Chelsea, giving dinner parties and going to the opera until nearly all the capital had gone, both dying just in time to leave enough to bring Gerald in a small income when he left Haileybury. And the wonderful thing was that Gerald liked mouching about and giggling. He liked looking for hours in shop

BACK WATER

windows and strolling on the Heath eating peppermints.

3

Everything had disappeared into a soft blackness; only on the water a faint light was left. It came and went; sometimes there was nothing but darkness and the soft air. The small paper lantern swinging at the bow made a little blot of light that was invisible from the stroke seat. The boat went swiftly and easily. Miriam felt she could go on pulling for hours at the top of her strength through the night. Leaning forward, breasting the featureless darkness, sweeping the sculls back at the full reach of her arms, leaning back and pressing her whole weight upwards from the foot-board against the pull of the water, her body became an outstretched elastic system of muscles, rhythmically working against the smooth dragging resistance of the dark water. Her sleeves were rolled up, her collar-stud unfastened, her cool drowsy lids drooped over her cool eyes. Each time she leaned backwards against her stroke, pressing the foot-board, the weight of her body dragged at a line of soreness where the sculls pressed her hands, and with the final fling of the water from the sculls a little stinging pain

PILGRIMAGE

ran along the pads of her palms. To-morrow there would be a row of happy blisters.

"You needn't put more beef into it than you like, Mirry." Gerald's voice came so quietly out of the darkness that it scarcely disturbed Miriam's ecstasy. She relaxed her swing, and letting the sculls skim and dip in short easy strokes, sat glowing.

"I've never pulled a boat alone before."

"It shows you can't be a blue-stockings, thank the Lord," laughed Gerald.

"Who said I was?"

"I've always understood you were a very wise lady, my dear."

"Nobody told you she was a blue-stockings, silly. You invented the word yourself."

"I? I invented blue-stockings?"

"Yes, you, silly. It's like your saying women never date their letters just because your cousins don't."

"Vive la reine. The Lord deliver me from blue-stockings, anyhow."

"All *right*, what *about* it? There aren't any here!"

"You're not one, anyhow."

BACKWATER

4

The next day after tea Eve arrived home from Gloucestershire.

Miriam had spent the day with Harriett. After breakfast, bounding silently up and down-stairs, they visited each room in turn, chased each other about the echoing rooms and passages of the basement and all over the garden. Miriam listened speechlessly to the sound of Harriett's heels soft on the stair carpet, ringing on the stone floors of the basement, and the swish of her skirts as she flew over the lawn following surrounding responding to Miriam's wild tour of the garden. Miriam listened and watched, her eyes and ears eagerly gathering and hoarding visions. It could not go on. Presently some claim would be made on Harriett and she would be alone. But when they had had their fill of silently rushing about, Harriett piloted her into the drawing-room and hastily began opening the piano. A pile of duets lay on the lid. She had evidently gathered them there in readiness. Wandering about the room, shifting the familiar ornaments, flinging herself into chair after chair, Miriam watched her and saw that her strange quiet little snub face

PILGRIMAGE

was lit and shapely. Harriett, grown-up, serene and well-dressed and going to be married in the spring, was transported by this new coming together. When they had played the last of the duets that they knew well, Harriett fumbled at the pages of a bound volume of operas in obvious uncertainty. At any moment Miriam might get up and go off and bring their sitting together on the long cretonne-covered duet stool to an end. "Come on," roared Miriam gently, "let's try this"; and they attacked the difficult pages. Miriam counted the metre, whispered it intoned and sang it, carrying Harriett along with shouts "go on, go on" when they had lost each other. They smashed their way along by turns playing only a single note here and there into the framework of Miriam's desperate counting, or banging out cheerful masses of discordant tones, anything to go on driving their way together through the pages while the sunlight streamed half seen into the conservatory and the flower-filled garden crowded up against the windows, anything to come out triumphantly together at the end and to stop satisfied, the sounds of the house, so long secretly known to them both, low now around them, heard by them together,

BACKWATER

punctuating their joy. The gong sounded for lunch. "Eve," Miriam remembered suddenly, "Eve's coming this afternoon." The thought set gladness thundering through her as she rose from the piano. "Let's go for a walk after lunch," she muttered. Harriett blushed.

"Awri," she responded tenderly.

5

The mile of gently rising roadway leading to the Heath was overarched by huge trees. Shadowy orchards, and the silent sunlit outlying meadows and park land of a large estate streamed gently by them beyond the trees as they strode along through the cool leaf-scented air. They strode speechlessly ahead as if on a pilgrimage, keeping step. Harriett's stylish costume had a strange unreal look in the great lane, under the towering trees. Miriam wondered if she found it dull and was taking it so boldly because they were walking along it together. Obviously she did not want to talk. She walked along swiftly and erect, looking eagerly ahead as if, when they reached the top and the Heath and the windmill, they would find something they were both looking for. Miriam felt she could glance about unno-

PILGRIMAGE

ticed and looked freely, as she had done so many hundreds of times before, at the light on the distant meadows and lying along the patches of undergrowth between the trunks of the trees. They challenged and questioned her silently as they had always done and she them, in a sort of passionate sulkiness. They gave no answer, but the scents in the cool tree-filled air went on all the time offering steady assurance, and presently as walking became an unconscious rhythm and the question of talk or no talk had definitely decided itself, the challenge of the light was silenced and the shaded roadway led on to paradise. Was there anyone anywhere who saw it as she did? Anyone who looking along the alley of white road would want to sit down in the roadway or kneel amongst the undergrowth and shout and shout? In the north of London there were all those harsh street voices infesting the trees and the parks. No! they did not exist. There was no North London. Let them die. They did not know the meaning of far-reaching meadows, park-land, deer, the great silent Heath, the silent shoulders of the windmill against the far-off softness of the sky. Harsh streetiness . . . cunning, knowing . . . do you *blame* me? . . . or

BACKWATER

char-womanishness, smarmy; churchy or chapelish sentimentality. Sentimentality. No need to think about them.

"Never the time and the place and the loved one all together." Who said that? Was it true? Dreadful. It couldn't be. So many people had seen moonlit gardens, together. All the happy people who were sure of each other. "I say, Harriett," she said at the top of her voice, bringing Harriett curvetting in the road just in front of her. "I say, listen." Harriett ran up the remaining strips of road and out on to the Heath. It was ablaze with sunlight—as the river and the trees had been yesterday—a whole day of light and Eve on her way home, almost home. Harriett must not know how she was rushing to Eve; with what tingling fingers. "Oh, what I was going to ask you was whether you can see the moonlight like it is when you are alone, when Gerald is there."

". . . It isn't the same as when you are alone," said Harriett quietly, arranging the cuff of her glove.

"Do explain what you mean."

"Well, it's different."

"I see. You don't know how."

PILGRIMAGE

"It's quite different."

"Does Gerald like the moonlight?"

"I dunno. I never asked him."

"Fancy the Rochampton people living up here all the time."

"There's their old washing going flip-flap over there."

Harriett was finding out that she was back in the house with Eve.

"Let's rush to the windmill. Let's sing."

"Come on; only we can't rush and sing too."

"Yes we can, come on." Running up over hillocks and stumbling through sandy gorse-grown hollows they sang a hunting song, Miriam leading with the short galloping phrases, Harriett's thinner voice dropping in, broken and uncertain, with a strange brave sadness in it that went to Miriam's heart.

6

"Eve, you look exactly like Dudley's gracious lady in these things. Don't you feel like it?" Eve stopped near the landing window and stood in her light green canvas dress with its pale green silk sleeves shedding herself over Miriam from under her rose-trimmed white chip hat. Miriam

BACKWATER

was carrying her light coat and all the small litter of her journey. "Go on up," she said, "I want to talk," and Eve hurried on, Miriam stumblingly following her, holding herself in, eyes and ears wide for the sight and sound of the slender figure flitting upstairs through the twilight. The twilight wavered and seemed to ebb and flow, suggesting silent dawn and full midday, and the house rang with a soundless music.

"It was Mrs. Wallace who suggested my *wearing* all my best things for the journey," panted Eve; "they don't get crushed with packing and they needn't get dirty if you're careful."

"You look exactly like Dudley's gracious lady. You know you do. You know it perfectly well."

"They do seem jolly now I'm back. They don't seem anything down there. Just ordinary with everybody in much grander things."

"How do you mean, grander? What sort of things?"

"Oh, all sorts of lovely white dresses."

"It is extraordinary about all those white dresses," said Miriam emphatically, pushing her way after Eve into Sarah's bedroom. "Can I come in? I'm coming in. Sarah says it's because men like them and she gets simply sick of girls

PILGRIMAGE

in white and cream dresses all over the place in the summer, and it's a perfect relief to see anyone in a colour in the sun. They have red sunshades sometimes, but Sarah says that's not enough; you want people in colours. I wonder if there's anything in it?"

"Of course there is," said Sarah, releasing the last strap of Eve's trunk.

"They'd *all* put on coloured things if it weren't for that."

"Men tell them."

"Do they?"

"The engaged men tell them—or brothers."

"I can't think how you get to know these things, sober Sally."

"Oh, you can tell."

"Well, then, *why* do men like silly white and cream dresses, pasty, whitewashy clothes altogether?"

"It's something they want; it looks different to them."

"Sarah knows all sorts of things," said Miriam excitedly, watching the confusion of the room from the windows. "She says she knows why the Pooles look down and smirk; their dimples and

BACKWATER

the line of their chins; that men admire them looking down like that. *Isn't* it frightful. Disgusting. And men don't seem to see through them."

"It's those kind of girls get on best."

Miriam sighed.

"Oh well, don't let's think about them. Not to-night, anyhow," cooed Eve.

"Sarah says there are much more awful reasons. I can't think how she finds them all out. Sober Sally. I know she's right. It's too utterly sickening somehow, for words."

"Mim."

"*Poooh—barooo, baroooo.*"

"Mim——"

"Damnation."

"Mimmy—Jim."

"I said DAMNATION."

"Oh, it's all right. What have we got to do with horrid knowing people."

"Well, they're there, all the time. You can't get away from them. They're all over the place. Either the knowing ones or the simpering ones. It's all the same in the end."

Eve quietly began to unpack. "Oh well,"

PILGRIMAGE

she smiled, "we're *all* different when there are men about to when we're by ourselves. We all make eyes in a way."

"Eve! What a perfectly beastly thing to say."

"It isn't, my dear," said Eve pensively. "You should see yourself; you do."

"Sally, *do* I?"

7

"Of course you do," giggled Eve quietly, "as much as anybody."

"Then I'm the most crawling thing on the face of the earth," thought Miriam, turning silently to the tree-tops looming softly just outside the window; "and the worst of it is I only know it at moments now and again." The tree-tops serene with some happy secret cast her off, and left her standing with groping cringing fingers unable to lift the misery they pressed upon her heart. "God, what a filthy world! God what a filthy world!" she muttered. "Everyone hemmed and hemmed and hemmed into it." Harriett came in and stepped up on to the high canopied bed. "Ullo," she said in general, sitting herself up tailor-fashion in the middle of the bed so that the bright twilight fell

BACKWATER

full upon her head and the breast and shoulders of her light silk-sleeved dress. Humming shreds of a violin obligato, Eve rustled out layer after layer of paper-swathed garments, to be gathered up by Sarah moving solidly about between the wardrobe and the chest of drawers in her rather heavy boots. There would not be any talk. But silently the room filled and overflowed. Turning at last from her window, Miriam glanced at her sisters and let her thoughts drop into the flowing tide. Harry, sitting there sharp and upright in the fading light, coming in to them with her future life streaming out behind her spreading and shining and rippling, herself the radiant point of that wonderful life, actually there, neatly enthroned amongst them, one of them, drawing them all with her out towards its easy security; Eve, happy with her wardrobe of dainty things, going fearlessly forward to some unseen fate, not troubling about it. Sarah's strange clean clear channel of wisdom. Where would it lead? It would always drive straight through everything.

All these things meant that the mere simple awfulness of things at home had changed. These three girls she had known so long as fellow-

PILGRIMAGE

prisoners, and who still bore at moments in their eyes, their movements, the marks of the terrors and uncertainties amongst which they had all grown up, were going on, out into life, scored and scarred, but alive and changeable, able to become quite new. Memories of strange crises and the ageing deadening shifts they had invented to tide them over humiliating situations were here crowded in the room together with them all. But these memories were no longer as they had so often been, the principal thing in the room whenever they were all gathered silently together. If Eve and Harriett had got away from the past and now had happy eyes and mouths. . . . Sarah's solid quiet cheerfulness, now grown so large and free that it seemed even when she was stillest to knock your mind about like something in a harlequinade. . . . Why had they not all known in the past that they would change? Why had they been so oppressed whenever they stopped to think?

Those American girls in "Little Women" and "Good Wives" made fun out of everything. But they had never had to face real horrors and hide them from everybody, mewed up.

BACKWATER

8

When it was nearly dark Sarah lit the gas. Harriett had gone downstairs. Miriam lowered the Venetian blinds, shutting out the summer. To-morrow it would be there again, waiting for them when they woke in the morning. In her own and Harriett's room the daylight would be streaming in through the Madras muslin curtains, everything in the room very silent and distinct; nothing to be heard but the little flutterings of birds under the eaves. You could listen to it for ever if you kept perfectly still. When you drew back the curtains the huge day would be standing outside clear with gold and blue and dense with trees and flowers.

Sarah's face was uneasy. She seemed to avoid meeting anyone's eyes. Presently she faced them, sitting on a low rocking chair with her tightly clasped hands stretched out beyond her knees. She glanced fearfully from one to the other and bit her lips. "What now," thought Miriam. The anticipated holidays disappeared. Of course. She might have known they would. For a moment she felt sick, naked and weak. Then she braced herself to meet the shock. I must sit

PILGRIMAGE

"Of course."

"Did he say so?"

"Of *course* he did."

"Well, I s'pose we'd really better go."

"Of course, we're going."

"I'm going to look for a place in a family after next term. I shall give notice when I get back. You get more money in a family Eve says, and home life, and if you haven't a home they're only too glad to have you there in the holidays too."

"You take my advice, my dear girl. Don't go into a family. Eve'll find it out before she's much older."

"I must have more money."

"Mirry's so silly. She insists on paying her share of Brighton. Isn't she an owl?"

"Oh well, of course, if she's going to make a point of spending her cash when she needn't she'd better find a more paying job. That's certain sure."

BACKWATER

would go, she leaned her head against the open frame. The garden did not seem to be there. The tepid night air was like a wall, a black wall. For a moment a splintered red light, like the light that comes from a violent blow on the forehead, flashed along it. Sarah and Eve were talking in strange voices, interrupting each other. It would be a relief to do something, faint or something selfish. But she must hear what they were saying; listen to both the voices cutting through the air of the hot room. Propped weak-limbed against the window open-mouthed for air she forced herself to hear, pressing her cold hands closely together. The gas light that had seemed so bright hardly seemed to light the room at all. Everything looked small, even Grannie's old Chippendale bedstead and the double-fronted wardrobe. The girls were little monkey ghosts babbling together beside Eve's open trunk. Did they see that it was exactly like a grave?

9

The sun shone through the apple trees, making the small half-ripe apples look as though they were coated with enamel.

It was quite clear that if they did go away

PILGRIMAGE

together, the four of them, she, Eve, Gerald and Harriett to Brighton or somewhere, they would be able to forget. You could tell that from the strange quiet easy tone of Harriett's and Gerald's voices. There would be the aquarium. She supposed they would go to the aquarium with its strange underground smell of stagnant sea air and stare into the depths of those strange green tanks and watch the fish flashing about like shadows or skimming by near the front of the tank with the light full on their softly tinted scales. Harriett sat steadily at her side on the overturned seed-box, middle-aged and responsible, quietly discussing the details of the plan with Gerald, cross-legged at their feet on the grass plot. They had not said anything about the reasons for going; but of course Gerald must know all that. He knew everything now, all about the money troubles, all the awful things, and it seemed to make no difference to him. He made light of it. It was humiliating to think that he had come just as things had reached their worst, the house going to be sold, Pater and mother and Sarah going into lodgings in September, and the maddening helpless worry about mother and all the money for that. And yet it

BACKWATER

was a good thing he had known them all in the old house and seen them there, even pretending to be prosperous. And yet the house and garden was nothing to him. Just a house and garden. Harriett's house and garden, and he was going to take Harriett away. The house and garden did not matter.

She glanced at the sunlit fruit trees, the thickets of the familiar kitchen garden, the rising grass bank at the near end of the distant lawn, the eloquent back of the large red house. He could not see all the things there were there, all the long years, or know what it was to have that cut away and nothing ahead but Brighton aquarium with Harriett and Eve, and then the school again, and disgraceful lodgings in some strange place, no friends and everybody looking down on them. She met his eyes and they both smiled.

"Keep her perfectly quiet for the next few weeks, that's the idea, and when it's all over she'll be better than she's ever been in her life."

"D'you think so?"

"I don't think, I know she will; people always are. I've known scores of people have operations. It's nothing nowadays. Ask Bennett."

"Does he think she'll be better?"

PILGRIMAGE

"Of course."

"Did he say so?"

"Of *course* he did."

"Well, I s'pose we'd really better go."

"Of course, we're going."

"I'm going to look for a place in a family after next term. I shall give notice when I get back. You get more money in a family Eve says, and home life, and if you haven't a home they're only too glad to have you there in the holidays too."

"You take my advice, my dear girl. Don't go into a family. Eve'll find it out before she's much older."

"I must have more money."

"Mirry's so silly. She insists on paying her share of Brighton. Isn't she an owl?"

"Oh well, of course, if she's going to make a point of spending her cash when she needn't she'd better find a more paying job. That's certain sure."

CHAPTER VIII

1

“**Y**OU know I’m funny. I never talk to young ladies.”

Miriam looked leisurely at the man walking at her side along the grass-covered cliff; his well-knit frame, his well-cut blue serge, the trimness of collar and tie, his faintly blunted regular features, clean ruddy skin and clear expressionless German blue eyes. Altogether he was rather like a German, with his red and white and gold and blue colouring and his small military moustache. She could imagine him snapping abruptly in a booming chest voice, “Mit Frauen spreche ich *überhaupt* nicht.” But he spoke slowly and lauguidly, he was an Englishman and somehow looked like a man who was accustomed to refined society. It was true he never spoke at the boarding-house meals, excepting an occasional word with his friend, and he had been obliged to join their Sunday walk because his friend was so

PILGRIMAGE

determined to come. Still he was not awkward or clumsy either at table or now. Only absolutely quiet, and then saying such a startling rather rude thing quite suddenly. One could stare at him to discover the reason of his funny speech, because evidently he was quite common, not a bounder but quite a common young man, speaking of women as 'young ladies.' Then how on earth did he manage to look distinguished. Oppressed and ill at ease she turned away to the far-reaching green levels and listened to the sea tumbling heavily far below against the cliffs. Away ahead Eve and her little companion walking jauntily along, his tight dust-coloured curls exposed to the full sunlight, his cane swinging round as he talked and laughed, seemed to be turning inland towards the downs. They had seen Ovingdean in the distance, stupid Ovingdean that everybody had talked about at breakfast, and were finding the way. How utterly silly. They did not see how utterly silly it was to make up your mind to "go to Ovingdean" and then go to Ovingdean. How utterly silly everybody and everything was.

Eve looked very straight and slim and was walking happily, bending her head a little as she

BACKWATER

always did when she was listening. Their backs looked happy. And here she was forced to walk with this nice-looking strange solid heavyish man and his cold insulting remark; almost the only thing he had said since they had been alone together. It had been rather nice walking along the top of the cliff side by side saying nothing. They walked exactly in step and his blunted features looked quite at ease; and she had gone easily along disposing of him with a gentle feeling of proprietorship, and had watched the gentle swing and movement of the landscape as they swung along. It seemed secure and painless and was gradually growing beautiful, and then suddenly she felt that he must have his thoughts, men were always thinking, and would be expecting her to be animated and entertaining. Lumpishly she had begun about the dullness of the beach and promenade on Sundays and the need to find something to do between dinner and tea—lies. All conversation was a lie. And somehow she had led him to his funny German remark.

“How do you mean?” she said at last anxiously. It was very rude intruding upon him like that. He had spoken quite simply. She ought to have laughed and changed the conversation. But it

PILGRIMAGE

was no laughing matter. He did not know what he was saying or how horribly it hurt. A worldly girl would chaff and make fun of him. It was detestable to make fun of men; just a way of flirting. But Sarah said that being rude to men or talking seriously to them was flirting just as much. Not true. Not true. And yet it was true, she did want to feel happy walking along with this man, have some sort of good understanding with him, him as a man with her as a woman. Was that flirting? If so she was just a more solemn underhand flirt than the others, that was all. She felt very sad. Anyhow she had asked her question now. She looked at his profile. Perhaps he would put her off in some way. Then she would walk slower and slower until Harriett and Gerald caught them up and come home walking four in a row, taking Harriett's arm. His face had remained quite expressionless.

"Well," he said at length in his slow well-modulated tone, "I always take care to get out of the way when there are any young ladies about."

"When do you mean?" *I didn't ask you to come, I don't want to talk to you, you food-loving,*

BACKWATER

pipe-loving, comfort-loving beast, she thought. But it would be impossible to finish the holiday and go back to the school with this strange statement uninvestigated.

"Well, when my sisters have young ladies in in the evening I always get out of the way."

Ah, thought Miriam, you are one of those men who flirt with servants and shop-girls . . . perhaps those awful women. . . . Either she must catch Eve up or wait for Harriett . . . not be alone any longer with this man.

"I see. You simply run away from them," she said scornfully; "go out for a walk or something." A small Brixton sitting-room full of Brixton girls—Gerald said that Brixton was something too chronic for words, just like Clapham, and there was that joke about the man who said he would not go to heaven even if he had the chance because of the strong Clapham contingent that would be there—after all . . .

"I go and sit in my room."

"Oh," said Miriam brokenly, "in the winter? Without a fire?"

Mr. Parrow laughed. "I don't mind about that. I wrap myself up and get a book."

"What sort of book?"

PILGRIMAGE

"I've got a few books of my own; and there's generally something worth reading in 'Tit-Bits.' "

How did he manage to look so refined and cultured? Those girls were quite good enough for him, probably too good. But he would go on despising them and one of them would marry him and give him beef-steak puddings. And here he was walking by the sea in the sunlight, confessing his suspicions and fears and going back to Brixton.

"You'll have to marry one of those young ladies one day," she said abruptly.

"That's out of the question, even if I was a marrying man."

"Nonsense," said Miriam, as they turned down the little pathway leading towards the village. Poor man, how cruel to encourage him to take up with one of those giggling dressy girls.

"D'you mean to say you've been never specially interested in anybody?"

"Yes. I never have."

2

Ovingdean had to be faced. They were going to look at Ovingdean and then walk back to the

BACKWATER

boarding-house to tea. Now that she knew all about his home-life she would not be able to meet his eyes across the table. Two tired elm trees stood one on either side of the road at the entrance to the village. Here they all gathered and then went forward in a strolling party.

When they turned at last to walk home and fell again into couples as before, Miriam searched her empty mind for something to say about the dim, cool musty church, the strange silent deeps of it there amongst the great green downs, the waiting chairs, the cold empty pulpit and the little cold font, and the sunlit front of the old Grange where King Charles had taken refuge. Mr. Parrow would know she was speaking insincerely if she said anything about these things. There was a long, long walk ahead. For some time they walked in silence. "D'you know anything about architecture?" she said at last angrily . . . cruel silly question. Of course he didn't. But men she walked with ought to know about architecture and be able to tell her things.

"No. That's a subject I don't know anything about."

"D'you like churches?"

PILGRIMAGE

"I don't know that I've ever thought about it."

"Then you probably don't."

"Oh, well, I don't know about that. I don't see any objection to them."

"Then you're probably an atheist."

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Do you go to church?"

"I can't say I do in the usual way, unless I'm on a holiday."

"Perhaps you go for walks instead?"

"Well, I generally stay in bed and have a rest."

That dreadful room with the dreadful man hiding in it and reading "Tit-Bits" and staying in bed in it on bright Sunday mornings.

How heavily they were treading on the orange and yellow faces of the Tom Thumbs scattered over the short green grass.

"How much do you think people could marry on?" said Mr. Parrow suddenly in a thin voice.

"Oh well, that depends on who they are."

"I suppose it does do that."

"And where they are going to live."

"D'you think anyone could marry on a hundred and fifty?"

BACKWATER

"Of course," said Miriam emphatically, mentally shivering over the vision of a tiresome determined cheerful woman with a thin pinched reddish nose, an everlasting grey hat and a faded ulster going on year after year; two or three common children she would never be able to educate, with horribly over-developed characters. It was rather less than the rent of their house. "Of course, everything would depend on the woman," she said wisely. After all a hundred and fifty, with no doubt and anxiety about it was a very wonderful thing to have. Probably everybody was wasteful, buying the wrong things and silly things, ornaments and brooches and serviette rings; . . . and not thinking things out and not putting things down in books and not really enjoying managing the hundred and fifty and always wanting more. It ought to be quite jolly being thoroughly common and living in a small way and having common neighbours doing the same.

"But you think if a man could find a young lady who could agree about prices it would be possible."

"Of course it would."

The houses on the eastern ridges of Brighton

PILGRIMAGE

came into sight in the distance and stood blazing in the sunlight. There was a high half broken-down piece of fencing at the edge of the cliff to their left a little ahead of them, splintered and sunlit.

"How much a week is a hundred and fifty a year?"

"Three pound."

They gravitated towards the fence and stood vaguely near it looking out across the unruffled glare of the open sea. Why had she always thought that the bright blue and gold ripples seen from the beach and the promenade on jolly weekdays was the best of the sea? It was much more lovely up there, the great expanse in its quiet Sunday loneliness. You could see and think about far-off things instead of just dreaming on the drowsy hot sands, seeing nothing but the rippling stripes of bright blue and bright gold. She put her elbows on the upper bar. Mr. Parrow did the same and they stood gazing out across the open sea—Mr. Parrow was probably wondering how long they were going to stand silently there and thinking about his tea . . . of course; let him stand—until Eve's voice sounded near them in a dimpling laugh. They walked

BACKWATER

home in a row, Eve and Mr. Green in the centre, asking riddles one against the other. Every time Miriam spoke Mr. Parrow laughed or made some little responsive sound.

3

When Mr. Green and Mr. Parrow went back to London at the end of the week Eve and Miriam saw them off at the station. The four went off boldly together down the flight of white stone steps and made their way up into the town.

"Good-bye," called Miss Meldrum affectionately from the doorway. "I shall send both of you a copy of the photograph."

"It's most generous of Miss Meldrum to go to all that expense to give us a pleasant memento," said Mr. Green in his small ringing voice as they all swung out into the clean bare roadway. Miriam felt as if they were a bit of the photograph walking up the hill, and went freely and confidently along with a sense of being steered and guided by Miss Meldrum. Why had she had the group taken—so odd and bold of her, having the photographer waiting in the garden for them before they had finished breakfast, and then laughing and talking and pushing them all

PILGRIMAGE

about as if they were her dearest friends. It was whilst they were all out in the garden together, hanging about and being arranged, with the photographer's voice like the voice of a ventriloquist, knocking them coldly about, that Gerald and Mr. Green had arranged about the evening at the Crystal Palace on the last day of Miriam's holiday. Miriam had held back from the group, feeling nervous about her hair, there had been no time to go to their rooms, and had forced Eve to do the same. Harriett, with a cheerful shiny face, was sitting on the grass with Gerald in a line with the traveller from Robinson and Cleaver's, and his thin-voiced sheeny-haired mocking fiancée. They all looked very small and bald. The fiancée kept clearing her throat and rearranging her smart feet and rattling her bangles. The traveller's heavy waxed moustache was crooked and his slippery blue eyes looked like the eyes of an old man. Next to him were two newly arrived restively sneering young men, one on either side of the saintly-faced florist's assistant from Wigmore Street, who sat in an easy pose with her skirt draping gracefully over her feet and her long white chin propped on her hands. She looked reproachfully about amongst the laughing

BACKWATER

and talking and seemed to feel that they were all in church.

Miss Meldrum and Miss Stringer, the two bald Scotch chemists who went out every evening to look for a comet, the pale frowning girl from Plaistow with her mad-eyed cousin whose grey curls bunched in a cherry-coloured velvet band seemed to say "death—death" to Miriam more dreadfully out here amongst the greenery than when she suddenly caught sight of them at table, sat disconnectedly in chairs behind the squatters on the grass. At the last moment she and Eve were obliged to fall in at the back of the group with Mr. Green and Mr. Parrow, and now the four of them were walking in a row up the staring white hill with the evening at the Crystal Palace ahead of them in far-away London. It was quite right. They were being like 'other people.' People met and made friends and arranged to meet again. And then things happened. It was quite right and ordinary and safe and warm. Of course Eve and Mr. Green must meet again. He was evidently quite determined that they should. That was what was carrying them all so confidently up the hill. Perhaps he would in the end turn into another Gerald. When they turned off

PILGRIMAGE

into the unfamiliar Brighton streets Eve and Mr. Green went on ahead. Walking quickly in step along the narrow pavement amongst the unconcerned Brighton townspeople they looked so small and pitiful.

4

The brilliant sunlight showed up all the shabbiness of Mr. Green's London suit. He looked even smaller than he did in his holiday tweed. Miriam wanted to call to them and stop them, stop Eve's bright figure and her mop of thickly twisted brown hair and ask her what she was dreaming of, leave the two men there and go back, go out away alone with Eve down to the edge of the sea. She hesitated in her walking, not daring even to glance at her companion who was trudging along with bent head, carrying his large brown leather bag. The street was crowded and she manœuvred so that everyone they met should pass between them. Perhaps they would be able to reach the station without being obliged to speak to each other. Parrow. It was either quite a nice name or pitiful; like a child trying to say sparrow. Did he know that to other people it was a strange, important sort of name, rounded like the padding in the shoulders of his coat and his blunted features?

BACKWATER

Nobody knew him at all well. Not a single person in the world. If he were run over and killed on the way to the station, nobody would ever have known anything about him. . . . People did die like that . . . probably most people; in a minute, alone and unknown; too late to speak.

Something was coming slowly down the middle of the roadway from amongst the confusion of the distant traffic; an elephant—a large grey elephant. Firmly, delicately undisturbed by the noise of the street, the huge crimson gold-braided howdah it carried on its back, and the strange, coloured things coming along behind it, the thickening of people on the pavement and the suddenly increased noise of the town, it came stepping. It was wonderful. "Wise and beautiful! Wise and beautiful!" cried a voice far away in Miriam's brain. It's a circus said another voice within her. . . . He doesn't know he's in a circus. . . . She hurried forward to reach Eve. Eve turned a flushed face. "*I say*; it's a circus," said Miriam biting. The blare of a band broke out farther up the street. People were jostled against them by a clown who came bounding and leaping his way along the crowded pavement crying incoherent words with a thrilling blatter of

PILGRIMAGE

laughter. The elephant was close upon them alone in the road space cleared by its swinging walk. . . . If only everyone would be quiet they could hear the soft padding of its feet. Slowly, gently, modestly it went by followed by a crowd of smaller things; sad-eyed monkeys on horseback in gold coatlets, sullen caged beasts on trolleys drawn by beribboned unblinker human-looking horses, tall white horses pacing singly by, bearing bobbing princesses and men in masks and cloaks.

5

Here and there in the long sunlit hours of the holiday by the Brighton sea Miriam found the far-away seaside holidays of her childhood. Going out one afternoon with Eve and Miss Stringer walking at Eve's side, listening to the conversation of the two girls, she had felt when they reached the deserted end of the esplanade and proposed turning round and walking home, an uncontrollable desire to be alone, and had left them, impatiently, without a word of excuse and gone on down the grey stone steps and out among the deserted weed-grown sapphire-pooled chalk hummocks at the foot of the cliffs. For a while she was chased by little phrases from Miss Stringer's

BACKWATER

quiet talking—"if you want people to be interested in you, you must be interested in them"; "you can get on with everybody if you make up your mind to"—and by the memory of her well-hung clothes and her quiet regular features spoilt by the nose that Gerald said was old-maidish, and her portmanteau full of finery, unpacked on the first-floor landing outside the tiny room she occupied—piles of underlinen startlingly threaded with ribbons.

At the end of half an hour's thoughtless wandering over the weed-grown rocks she found herself sitting on a little patch of dry silt at the end of a promontory of sea-smoothed hummocks with the pools of bright blue-green fringed water all about her watching the gentle rippling of the retreating waves over the weedy lower levels. She seemed long to have been listening and watching, her mind was full of things she felt she would never forget, the green-capped white faces of the cliffs, a patch of wet sand dotted with stiffly waiting seagulls, the more distant wavelets ink black and golden pouring in over the distant hummocks, the curious whispering ripples near her feet. She must go back. Her mind slid out making a strange half-familiar compact with all these

PILGRIMAGE

things. She was theirs, she would remember them all, always. They were not alone because she was with them and knew them. She had always known them she reflected, remembering with a quick pang a long, unpermitted wandering out over the cliff edge beyond Dawlish, the sun shining on pinkish sandy scrub, the expression of the bushes; hurrying home with the big rough spaniel that belonged to the house they had hired. She must have been about six years old. She had gone back with a secret, telling them nothing of the sunlight or the bushes, only of a strange lady, sitting on the jetty as she came down over the sands, who caught her in her arms and horribly kissed her. She had forgotten the lady and been so happy when she reached home that no one had scolded her. And when they questioned her it seemed that there was only the lady to tell them about. Her mother had looked at her and kissed her. And now she must go back again, and say nothing. The strange promise, the certainty she felt out here on the rocks must be taken back to the Brighton front and the boarding-house. It would disappear as soon as she got back. Here on the Brighton rocks it was not so strong as it had been in Dawlish. And it would disappear more com-

BACKWATER

pletely. There had been during the intervening years holidays with Sarah and Eve and Harriett in seaside lodgings, over which the curious conviction that possessed her now had spread like a filmy veil. But now it would hardly ever come; there were always people talking, the strangers one worked for, or the hard new people like Miss Stringer, people who had a number of things they were always saying.

She tried to remember when the strange independent joy had begun and thought she could trace it back to a morning in the garden at Babington, the first thing she could remember, when she had found herself toddling alone along the garden path between beds of flowers almost on a level with her head and blazing in the sunlight. Bees with large bodies were sailing heavily across the path from bed to bed, passing close by her head and making a loud humming in the air. She could see the flowers distinctly as she walked quickly back through the afternoon throng on the esplanade; they were sweet williams and "everlasting" flowers, the sweet williams smelling very strongly sweet in her nostrils, and one sheeny brown everlasting flower that she had touched with her nose, smelling like hot paper.

PILGRIMAGE

6

She wanted to speak to someone of these things. Until she could speak to someone about them she must always be alone. Always quite alone, she thought, looking out as she walked across the busy stretch of sea between the two piers, dotted with pleasure boats. It would be impossible to speak to anyone about them unless one felt perfectly sure that the other person felt about them in the same way and knew that they were more real than anything else in the world, knew that everything else was a fuss about nothing. But everybody else seemed to be really interested in the fuss. That was the extraordinary thing. Miss Meldrum presiding at the boarding-house table with her white padded hair and her white face and bright steady brown eyes, listening to everybody and making jokes with everybody and keeping things going, sometimes looked as if she knew it was all a pretence, but if you spoke to her she would think you were talking about religion and would kiss you. She had already kissed Miriam once—for playing accompaniments to the hymns on a Sunday evening, and made her feel as if there were some sly secret between them.

BACKWATER

If she played the hymns again she would play them stonily . . . mother would look as she always did if you suddenly began to talk anything about things in general as if you were going to make some confession she had been waiting for all her life. Now, with the operation and all the uncertainty ahead she would probably cry. She would want to explain in some way, as she had done one day long ago; how dreadful it had been . . . mother, I never feel tired, not really tired, and however I behave I always feel frightfully happy inside . . . my blessed chick, it's your splendid health—and the influence of the Holy Spirit. . . . But I hate everybody. . . . What foolish nonsense. You mustn't think such things. You will make yourself unpopular. . . .

She must keep her secret to herself. This Brighton life crushed it back more than anything there had been in Germany or at Banbury Park. In Germany she had found it again and again, and at Banbury Park, though it could never come out and surround her, it was never far off. It lurked just beyond the poplars in the park, at the end of the little empty garden at twilight, amongst the books in the tightly packed bookcase. It was here, too, in and out the sunlit days. As

PILGRIMAGE

one opened the door of the large, sparsely furnished breakfast-room it shone for a moment in the light pouring over the table full of seated forms; it haunted the glittering scattered sand round about the little blank platform where the black and white minstrels stood singing in front of their harmonium, and poured out across the blaze of blue and gold sea ripples, when the town band played Anitra's Dance or the moon song from the Mikado; it lay all along the deserted promenade and roadway as you went home to lunch, and at night it spoke in the flump flump of the invisible sea against the lower woodwork of the pier pavilion.

7

But every day at breakfast over the eggs, bacon and tomatoes—knowing voices began their day's talking, the weary round of words and ugly laughter went steadily on, narrow horrible sounds that made you feel conscious of the insides of people's throats and the backs of their noses—as if they were not properly formed. The talk was like a silly sort of battle. . . . Innuendo, Miriam would say to herself, feeling that the word was too beautiful for what she wanted to express;

BACKWATER

double entendre was also unsatisfactory. These people were all enemies pretending to be friends. Why did they pretend? Why not keep quiet? Or all sing between their eating, different songs, it would not matter. She and Eve and Harriett and Gerald did sometimes hum the refrains of the nigger minstrels' songs, or one of them would hum a scrap of a solo and all three sing the chorus. Then people were quiet, listening and smiling their evil smiles and Miss Meldrum was delighted. It seemed improper and half-hearted as no one else joined in; but after the first few days the four of them always sang between the courses at dinner. Gerald did not seem to mind the chaffy talk and the vulgar jokes, and would generally join in; and he said strange disturbing things about the boarders, as if he knew all about them. And he and Harriett talked to the niggers too and found out about them. It spoilt them when one knew that they belonged to small London musical halls, and had wives and families and illnesses and trouble. Gerald and Harriett did not seem to mind this. They did not seem to mind anything out of doors. They were free and hard and contemptuous of everyone except the niggers and a few very stylish-looking people

PILGRIMAGE

who sailed along and took no notice of anybody. Gerald said extraordinary, disturbing things about the girls on the esplanade. Miriam and Eve were interested in some of the young men they saw. They talked about them and looked out for them. Sometimes they exchanged glances with them. Were she and Eve also "on show"; waiting to be given "half an inch"; would she or Eve be "perfectly awful in the dark?" Did the young men they specially favoured with their notice say things about them? When these thoughts buzzed about in Miriam's brain she wanted to take a broom and sweep everybody into the sea. . . . She discovered that a single steady unexpected glance, meeting her own, from a man who had the right kind of bearing—something right about the set of the shoulders—could disperse all the vague trouble she felt at the perpetual spectacle of the strolling crowds, the stiffly waiting many-eyed houses, the strange stupid bathing-machines, and send her gaily forward in a glad world where there was no need to be alone in order to be happy. A second encounter was sad, shameful, ridiculous; the man became absurd and lost his dignity; the joyous sense of looking through him right out and away to an endless perspective, of

BACK WATER

being told that the endlessness was there and telling that the endlessness was there had gone; the eyes were eyes, solid and mocking and helpless—to be avoided in future; and when they had gone, the sunset or the curious quivering line along the horizon were no longer gateways, but hard barriers, until by some chance one was tranquilly alone again—when the horizon would beckon and lift and the pathway of gold across the sea at sunset call to your feet until they tingled and ached.

Life was ugly and cruel. The secret of the sea and of the evenings and mornings must be given up. It would fade more and more. What was life? Either playing a part all the time in order to be amongst people in the warm or standing alone with the strange true real feeling—alone with a sort of edge of reality on everything; even on quite ugly common things—cheap boarding-houses, face towels and blistered window frames.

8

Since Mr. Green and Mr. Parrow had left, they had given up going to pier entertainments and had spent most of their time sitting in a

PILGRIMAGE

close row and talking together, in the intervals of the black and white minstrel concerts and the performances of the town band. They had drifted into this way of spending their time; there was never any discussion or alteration of the day's programme. It worked like a charm and there was no sign of the breaking of the charm. Miriam was sometimes half afraid just as they settled themselves down that someone, probably Gerald or Eve might say 'Funny, isn't it, how well we four get on,' and that strange power that held them together and kept everything away would be broken before the holiday came to an end. But no one did and they went on sitting together in the morning on the hot sand—the moving living glinting sand that took the sting as soon as you touched it with your hand out of everything there might be in the latest letter from home—hearing the niggers from ten to eleven, bathing from eleven to twelve, sitting afterwards fresh and tingling and drowsy in canopied chairs near the band until dinner-time, prowling and paddling in the afternoon and ranging themselves again in chairs for the evening.

They said nothing until almost the end of their time about the passage of the days; but they

BACKWATER

looked at each other, each time they settled down, with conspiring smiles and then sat, side by side, less visible to each other than the great sunlit sea or the great clean salt darkness, stranded in a row with four easy idle laughing commenting voices, away alone and safe in the gaiety of the strong forgetful air—talking things over. The far-away troublesome crooked things, all cramped and painful and puzzling came out one by one and were shaken and tossed away along the clean wind. And there was so much for Gerald to hear. He wanted to hear everything—any little thing—“Just like a girl; it’s awfully jolly for Harry he’s like that. She’ll never be lonely,” agreed Miriam and Eve privately. . . . “He’s a perfect dear.” One night towards the end of their time they talked of the future. It had begun to press on them. There seemed no more time for brooding even over Eve’s fascinating little pictures of life in the big country house, or Miriam’s stories and legends of Germany—she said very little about Banbury Park fearing the amazement and disgust of the trio if anything of the reality of North London should reach them through her talk and guessing the impossibility of their realising the Pernes—or Gerald’s rich memories of the

PILGRIMAGE

opulence of his early home life, an atmosphere of spending and operas and banquets and receptions and distinguished people. During the evening, in a silent interval, just as the band was tuning up to begin its last tune, Gerald had said with quiet emphasis, "Well, anyhow, girls, you mark my words the old man won't make any more money. Nor another penny. You may as well make up your minds to that." Then the band had broken into their favourite Hungarian dance. Three of them sat blissfully back in their deck chairs, but Miriam remained uncomfortably propped forward, eagerly thinking. The music rushed on, she saw dancers shining before her in wild groups, in the darkness, leaping and shouting, their feet scarcely touching the earth and a wild light darted about them as they shouted and leapt. "Set Mirry up in some sort of business," quoted her mind from one of Gerald's recent soliloquies. She knew that she did not want that. But the dancing forms told her of the absurdity of going back without protest to the long aching days of teaching in the little school amongst those dreadful voices which were going, whatever she did for them, to be dreadful all their lives. Nothing she could do would make any difference

BACKWATER

to them. They did not want her. They were quite happy. Her feelings and thoughts, her way of looking at things, her desire for space and beautiful things and music and quietude would never be their desire. Reverence for things—had she reverence? She felt she must have because she knew they had not; even the old people; only superstition . . . North London would always be North London, hard, strong, sneering, money-making, noisy and trammy. Perhaps the difference between the north and the south and her own south-west of London was like the difference between the north and the south of England. . . . Green's "History of the English People" . . . spinning-jennys began in the Danish north, hard and cold, with later sunsets. In the south was Somersetshire lace. North London meant twenty pounds a year and the need for resignation and determination every day. Eve had thirty-five pounds and a huge garden and new books and music . . . a book called "Music and Morals" and interesting people staying in the house. And Eve had not been to Germany and could not talk French. "You are an idiot to go on doing it. It's wrong. Lazy," laughed the dancers crowding and flinging all round her. "I ought," she re-

PILGRIMAGE

sponded defiantly, "to stay on and make myself into a certificated teacher." "Certificated?" they screamed wildly sweeping before her in strange lines of light. "If you do you will be like Miss Cramp. Certificates—little conceited papers, and you dead. Certificates would finish you off—Kill—Kill—Kill—*Kill—Kill!* !" Bang. The band stopped and Miriam felt the bar of her chair wounding her flesh. The trail of the dancers flickered away across the sea and her brain was busily dictating her letter to Miss Perne: "and therefore I am obliged, however reluctantly, to take this step, as it is absolutely necessary for me to earn a larger salary at once."

CHAPTER IX

1

THE Henderson party found Mr. Green and Mr. Parrow waiting in the dim plank-floored corridor leading from the station to the main building of the Crystal Palace. When the quiet greetings were over and they had arranged a meeting-place at the end of the evening in case any of the party should be lost, they all tramped on up the resounding corridor. Miriam found herself bringing up the rear with Mr. Parrow. They were going on up the corridor, through the Palace and out into the summer evening. They had all come to go out into the summer evening and see the fireworks. All but she had come meaning to get quite near to the 'set pieces' and to look at them. She had not said anything about meaning to get as far away from the fireworks as possible. She had been trusting to Mr. Parrow for that. Now that she was with him she felt that perhaps it was not quite fair. He had

PILGRIMAGE

come meaning to see the fireworks. He would be disappointed. She would be obliged to tell him presently, when they got out into the night. They were all tramping quickly up along the echoing corridor. No one seemed to be talking, just feet, tramp, tramp on the planking, rather quickly. It was like the sound of workmen's feet on the inside scaffolding of a half-built house. The corridor was like something in the Hospital for Incurables . . . that strange old woman sitting in the hall with bent head laughing over her crochet, and Miss Garrett whom they had come to see sitting up in bed, a curtained bed in a ward, with a pleated mob cap all over the top of her head and half-way down her forehead, sitting back against large square pillows with her hands clasped on the neat bed-clothes and a "sweet, patient" look on her face, coughing gently and spitting, spitting herself to death . . . rushing away out of the ward to wait for mother downstairs in the hall with the curious smells and the dreadful old woman. . . . What was it, chick? . . . Sick, mother, I felt sick, I couldn't stay. It was rage; rage with that dreadful old woman. People probably told her she was patient and sweet, and she had got that trick putting her

BACKWATER

head on one side. She was not sweet. She was one of the worst of those dreadful people who would always make people believe in a particular way, all the time. She had a great big frame. If she had done anything but sit as she sat, in that particular way, one could have stayed.

They were all standing looking at some wonderful sort of clock, a calendar-clock—'a triumph of ingenuity,' said Mr. Green's bright reedy voice. The building had opened out and rushed up, people were passing to and fro. "We don't want to stay inside; let's go out," said Gerald. The group broke into couples again and passed on. Miriam found herself with Mr. Parrow once more. Of course she would be with him all the evening. She must tell him at once about the fireworks. She ought not to have come, if she did not mean to see the fireworks. It was mean and feeble to cheat him out of his evening. Why had she come; to wander about with him, not seeing the fireworks. What an idiotic and abominable thing. Now that she was here at his side it was quite clear that she must endure the fireworks. Anything else would be like asking him to wander about with her alone. She did not want to wander about with him alone. She took an op-

PILGRIMAGE

portunity of joining Eve for a moment. They had just walked through a winter garden and were standing at the door of a concert room, all quite silent and looking very shy. "Eve," she said hurriedly in a low tone, "d'you want to see the beastly fireworks?"

"Beastly? Oh, of course, I do," said Eve in a rather loud embarrassed tone. How dreadfully self-conscious they all were. Somebody seemed to be speaking. "What *sticks* my family are—I had no idea," muttered Miriam furiously into Eve's face. Eve's eyes filled with tears, but she stood perfectly still, saying nothing. Miriam wheeled round and stared into the empty concert room. It was filled with a faint bluish light and beyond the rows of waiting chairs and the empty platform a huge organ stood piled up towards the roof. The party were moving on. What a queer place the Crystal Palace is . . . what a perfectly horrible place for a concert . . . pianissimo passages and those feet on those boards tramping about outside. . . . What a silly muddle. Mr. Parrow was waiting for her to join the others. They struggled along past booths and stalls, meeting groups of people, silent and lost like themselves. Now they were passing some kind of

BACKWATER

stonework things, reliefs, antique, roped off like the seats in a church. Just in front of them a short man holding the red cord in his hands was looking at a group with some ladies. "*Why*," he said suddenly in a loud cheerful voice, stretching an arm out across the rope and pointing to one of the reliefs, "it's Auntie and Grandma!" Miriam stared at him as they passed, he was so short, shorter than any of the ladies he was with. "It's the only way to see these things," he said in the same loud harsh cheerful voice. Miriam laughed aloud. What a clever man.

"Do you like statues?" said Mr. Parrow in a low gentle tone.

"I don't know anything about them," said Miriam.

"I can't bear fireworks," she said hurriedly.

They were in the open at last. In the deepening twilight many people were going to and fro. In the distance soft dark masses of trees stood out against the sky in every direction. Not far away the ghostly frames of the set pieces reared against the sky made the open evening seem as prison-like as the enclosure they had just left. Round about the scaffolding of these pieces dense little crowds were collecting.

PILGRIMAGE

"Don't you want to see the fireworks?"

"I want to get away from them."

"All right, we'll get lost at once."

"It isn't," she explained a little breathlessly, in relief, suddenly respecting him, allowing him to thread a way for her through the increasing crowd towards the open evening, "that I don't want to see the fireworks, but I simply can't stand the noise."

"I see," laughed Mr. Parrow gently. They were making towards the open evening along a narrow gravel pathway, like a garden pathway. Miriam hurried a little, fearing that the fireworks might begin before they got to a safe distance.

"I never have been able to stand a sudden noise. It's torture to me to walk along a platform where a train may suddenly shriek."

"I see. You're afraid of the noise."

"It isn't fear—I can't describe it. It's agony. It's like pain. But much much worse than pain. It's—it's—annihilating."

"I see; that's very peculiar."

Their long pathway was leading them towards a sweet-scented density, dim bowers and leafy arches appeared just ahead.

"It was much worse even than it is now when

BACKWATER

I was a little thing. When we went to the sea-side I used to sit in the train nearly dead until it had screamed and started. And there was a teacher who sneezed—a noise like a hard scream—at school. She used to go on sneezing—twenty times or so. I was only six and I dreaded going to school just for that. Once I cried and they took me out of the room. I've never told anyone. Nobody knows."

"You've told me."

"Yes."

"It's very interesting. You shan't go anywhere near the fireworks."

2

A large rosy flare, wavering steadily against the distant trees showed up for a moment the shapes and traceries of climbing plants surrounding their retreat. A moment afterwards with a dull boom a group of white stars shot up into the air and hovered, melting one by one as the crowd below moaned and crackled its applause.

Miriam laughed abruptly. "That's jolly. How clever people are. But it's much better up here. It's like not being too near at the theatre."

"I think we've got the best view certainly."

PILGRIMAGE

"But we shall miss the set pieces."

"The people down there won't see the rosary."

"What's that black thing on our left down there?"

"That's the toboggan run. We ought to go on that."

"What is it like?"

"It's fine; you just rush down. We must try it."

"Not for worlds."

Mr. Parrow laughed. "Oh you must try the toboggan; there's no noise about that."

"I really couldn't."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I mean it. Nothing under the sun would induce me to go on a toboggan."

They sat watching the fireworks until they were tired of the whistling rockets, showers of stars and golden rain, the flaming bolts that shot up from the Battle of the Nile, the fizzlings and fire spurtings of the set pieces and the recurrent moanings and faint patterings of applause from the crowd.

"I wish they'd do some more coloured flares of light up the trees like they did at first. It was beautiful—more real than these things.

BACKWATER

'Feu d'artifice' artificial fire—all these noisy things. Why do people always like a noise? Men. All the things men have invented, trains and canons and things make a frightful noise."

"The toboggan's not noisy. Come and try the toboggan."

"Oh no."

"Well—there's the lake down there. We might have a boat."

"Do you know how to manage a boat?"

"I've been on once or twice; if you like to try I'll manage."

"No; it's too dark." What a plucky man. But the water looked cold. And perhaps he would be really stupid.

A solitary uniformed man was yawning and whistling at the top of the deserted toboggan run. The faint light of a lamp fell upon the square platform and the little sled standing in place at the top of a shiny slope which shot steeply down into blackness.

"We'd better get on," said Miriam trembling.

"Well, you're very graceful at giving in," remarked Mr. Parrow, handing her into the sled and settling with the man.

He got that sentence out of a book, thought

PILGRIMAGE

Miriam wildly as she heard the man behind them say "Ready? Off you go!" . . . Out of a book a book a book—*Oh—ooooh*—how absolutely glorious, she yelled as they shot down through the darkness. *Oh*, she squealed into the face laughing and talking beside her. She turned away, shouting, for the final rush, they were flying—involuntarily her hand flung out, they were tearing headlong into absolute darkness, and was met and firmly clasped. They shot slackening up a short incline and stood up still hand in hand, laughing incoherently.

"Let's walk back and try again," said Mr. Parrow.

"Oh no; I enjoyed it most frightfully; but we mustn't go again. Besides, it must be fearfully late."

She pulled at her hand. The man was too near and too big. His hand was not a bit uncertain like his speech, and for a moment she was glad that she pulled in vain. "Very well," said Mr. Parrow, "but we must find our way off the grass and strike the pathway." Drawing her gently along, he peered about for the track. "Let me go," said her hand dragging gently at his. "No," said the firm enclosure, tightening, "not yet."

BACKWATER

What does it matter? flashed her mind. Why should I be such a prude? The hand gave her confidence. It was firm and strong and perfectly serious. It was a hand like her own hand and comfortingly strange and different. Gently and slowly he guided her over the dewy grass. The air that had rushed so wildly by them a few minutes ago was still and calm and friendly; the distant crowd harmless and insignificant. The fireworks were over. The pathway they had missed appeared under their feet and down it they walked soberly, well apart, but still hand in hand until they reached the borders of the dispersing crowd.

CHAPTER X

1

WHEN Miriam sat talking everything over with the Pernes at supper, on the first night of the term, detached for ever from the things that engrossed them, the school-work, Julia Doyle's future, the peculiarities of the visiting teachers, the problem of the "unnatural infatuation" of two of the boarders with each other, the pros and cons of a revolutionary plan for taking the girls in parties to the principal London museums, she made the most of her triumphant assertion that she had absolutely nothing in view. She found herself decorously waiting, armed at all points, through the silent interval while the Pernes took in the facts of her adventurous renunciation. She knew at once that she would have to be desperately determined. . . . But after all they could not do anything with her.

Sitting there, in the Perne boat, still taking an oar and determined to fling herself into the sea

BACKWATER

. . . she ought not to have told them she was leaving them just desperately, without anything else in prospect; because they were so good, not like employers. They would all feel for her. It was just like speaking roughly at home. Well, it was done. She glanced about. Miss Haddie, across the table behind her habitual bowl of bread and milk had a face—the face of a child surprised by injustice. ‘I was right—I was right,’ Miriam gasped to herself as the light flowed in. ‘I’m escaping—just in time. . . . Emotional tyranny. . . . What a good expression . . . that’s the secret of Miss Haddie. It was awful. She’s lost me. I’m free. Emotional tyranny.’ . . . ‘My hat, Mirry, you’re beyond me. How much do you charge for that one. Say it again,’ she seemed to hear Gerald’s friendly voice. Go away Gerald. True. True. All the truth and meaning of her friendship with Miss Haddie in one single flash. How *fearfully* interesting life was. Miss Haddie wrestling with her, fighting for her soul; praying for her, almost driving her to the early service and always ready to quiver over her afterwards and to ask her if she had been happy. . . . And now angry because she was escaping.

PILGRIMAGE

She appealed to Miss Deborah and met a flash of her beautiful soft piercing eyes. Her delicate features quivered and wrinkled almost to a smile. But Miss Deborah was afraid of Miss Jenny who was already thinking and embarking on little sounds. Miriam got away for a moment in a tumult, with Miss Deborah. 'Oh,' she shouted to her in the depths of her heart, 'you are heavenly young. You *know*. Life's like Robinson Crusoe. Your god's a great big Robinson Crusoe. You know that anything may happen any minute. And it's all right. She laughed and shook staring at the salt-cellar and then across at Miss Haddie whose eyes were full of dark fear. Miss Haddie was alone and outraged. 'She thinks I'm a fraud besides being vulgar . . . life goes on and she'll wonder and wonder about me puzzled and alone.' . . . She smiled at her her broadest, happiest, home smile, one she had never yet reached at Banbury Park. Flushing scarlet Miss Haddie smiled in return.

"Eh—my dear girl," Miss Jenny was saying diffidently at her side, "isn't it a little unwise—very unwise—under the circumstances—with the difficulties—well, in fact with all ye've just told us—have ye thought?" When Miriam reached

BACKWATER

her broad smile Miss Jenny stopped and suddenly chuckled. "My dear Miriam! I don't know. I suppose we don't know ye. I suppose we haven't really known ye as ye are. But come, have ye thought it out? No, ye haven't," she ended gravely, looking along the table and flicking with her forefinger the end of her little red nose.

Miriam glanced at her profile and her insecure disorderly bunch of hair. Miss Jenny was formidable. She would recommend certificates. Her eye wavered towards Miss Deborah.

"My dear Jenny," said Miss Deborah promptly, "Miriam is not a child. She must do as she thinks best."

"But don't ye see my point, my dear Deborah? I don't say she's a child. She's a madcap. That's it." She paused. "Of course I daresay she'll fall on her feet. Ye're a most extraordinary gel. I don't know. Of course ye can come *back*—or stay here in yer holidays. Ye know *that*, my dear," she concluded, suddenly softening her sharp little voice.

"I don't *want* to go," cried Miriam with tear-filled eyes. They were one person in the grip of a decision. Miss Haddie sat up and moved her elbows about. All four pairs of eyes held tears.

PILGRIMAGE

"My dear—I wish we could give ye more, Miriam," murmured Miss Jenny; "we don't want to lose ye, ye've pulled the lower school together in a remarkable way"; Miss Deborah was drawing little breaths of protest at this descent into gross detail; "the children are interested. We hear that from the parents. We shall be able to give ye excellent testimonials."

"Oh, I don't care about that," responded Miriam desperately. 'Fancy—Great Scott—parents—behind all my sore throats—I've never heard about that. It's all coming out now,' she thought.

"Well—my dear—now——" began Miss Jenny hesitatingly. Feeling herself slipping, Miriam clung harshly to her determination and drew herself up to offer the set of the pretty blouse Gerald and Harriett had bought her in Brighton as a seal on her irrevocable decision to break with Banbury Park. It was a delicate sheeny green silk, with soft tuckers.

"What steps have ye taken?" asked Miss Jenny in a quizzical business-like tone.

"It's very kind of you," said Miriam formally, and went on to hint vaguely and convincingly at the existence of some place in a family in the

BACKWATER

country that would be sure to fall to her lot through the many friends to whom Eve had written on her behalf, turning away from the feast towards the freedom of the untenanted part of the room. The sitting had to be brought to an end. . . . In a moment she would be utterly routed. . . . Her lame statements were the end of the struggle. She knew she was demonstrating in her feeble broken tones a sort of blind strength they knew nothing of and that they would leave it at that, whatever they thought, if only there were no more talk.

2

When they had left the room and Flora came in for the supper things, instead of sitting as usual at the far end of the table pretending to read, she stood planted on the hearthrug watching her. Flora's hands were small and pale and serenely despairing like her face. She cleared the table quietly. She had nothing to hope for. She did not know she had nothing to hope for. Whatever happened she would go quietly on doing things . . . in the twilight . . . on a sort of edge. People would die. Perhaps people had already died in her family. But she would al-

PILGRIMAGE

ways be the same. One day she would die, perhaps of something hard and slow and painful with that small yellowish constitution.

She would not be able to go on looking serene and despairing with people round her bed helping her. When she died she would wait quietly with nothing to do, blind and wondering. Death would take her into a great festival—things for her for herself. She would not believe it and would put up her hands to keep it off. But it would be all round her in great laughter, like the deep roaring and crying of a flood. Then she would cry like a child.

Why was it that for some people, for herself, life could be happy now? It was possible now to hear things laugh just by setting your teeth and doing things; breaking into things, chucking things about, refusing to be held. It made even the dreadful past seem wonderful. All the days here, the awful days, each one awful and hateful and painful.

Flora had gathered up her tray and disappeared, quietly closing the door. But Flora had known and somehow shared her triumph, felt her position in the school as she stood planted and happy in the middle of the Pernes' hearthrug.

BACKWATER

3

"An island is a piece of land entirely surrounded by water."

Miriam kept automatically repeating these words to herself as the newly returned children clung about her the next morning in the schoolroom. It was a morning of heavy wind and rain and the schoolroom was dark, and chilly with its summer-screened fireplace. The children seemed to her for the first time small and pathetic. She was deserting them. After fifteen months of strange intimacy she was going away for ever.

During the usual routine days the little girls always seemed large and formidable. She was quite sure they were not so to the other teachers, and she hesitated when she thought over this difference, between the explanation which accounted for their size and redoubtability by her own feebleness and the one to which she inclined when she felt her success as a teacher.

She had discovered that the best plan was to stand side by side with the children in face of the things they had to learn, treating them as equals and fellow-adventurers, giving explanations when these were necessary, as if they were obvious and

PILGRIMAGE

might have been discovered by the children themselves, never as if they were possessions of her own, to be imparted, never claiming a knowledge superior to their own. 'The business of the teacher is to make the children independent, to get them to think for themselves, and that's much more important than whether they get to know facts,' she would say irrelevantly to the Pernes whenever the question of teaching came up. She bitterly resented their vision of children as malleable subordinates. And there were many moments when she seemed to be silently exchanging this determination of hers with her pupils. Good or bad, she knew it was the secret of her influence with them, and so long as she was faithful to it both she and they enjoyed their hours together. Very often she was tired, feeble with fatigue and scamping all opportunities; this too they understood and never took advantage of her. One or two of them would even when she failed try to keep things going on her own method. All this was sheer happiness to her, the bread and wine of her days.

But now and again, perhaps during the mid-morning recess, this impersonal relationship gave way and the children clung fawning all round her,

BACKWATER

passionately competing for nearness, touching and clinging and snatching for kisses. There was no thought or uprightness or laughter then, their hands were quick and eloquent and their eyes wide and deeply smiling with those strange women's smiles. Sometimes she could respond in kind, answering to their smiles and caresses, making gentle foolish sounds and feeling their passion rise to a frenzy of adoration. The little deprecating consoling sounds that they made as they clung told her that if she chose steadily to remain always gentle and deprecating and consoling and reproachful she could dominate them as persons and extort in the long run a complete personal obedience to herself, so that they would do their work for her sake and live by and through her, adoring her—as a goddess—and hating her. Even as they fawned she knew they were fighting between their aching desire for a perfection of tenderness in her and their fear lest she should fulfil the desire. She was always tempted for an instant to yield and fling herself irrevocably into the abyss, letting the children go on one by one into the upper school, carrying as her gift only a passionate memory such as she herself had for one of her nursemaids; leaving her downstairs

PILGRIMAGE

with an endless successes of new loves, different, but always the same. She would become like a kind of nun, making a bare subsistence, but so beloved always, so quivering and tender and responsive that human love would never fail her, and when strength failed there would be hands held out to shelter her decline. But the vision never held her for more than a moment. There was something in the thought of such pure personal sentiment that gave her a feeling of treachery towards the children. Mentally she flung them out and off, made them stand upright and estranged. She could not give them personal love. She did not want to; nor to be entangled with them. They were going to grow up into North London women, most of them loudly scorning everything that was not materially profitable; these would remember her with pity—amusement. A few would escape. These would remember her at strange moments that were coming for them, moments when they would recognise the beauty of things like 'the Psalm of Life' that she had induced them to memorise without understanding it.

This morning a sense of their softness and helplessness went to her heart. She had taught

BACKWATER

them so little. But she had forced them to be impersonal. Almost savagely she had done that. She had never taken them by a trick. . . .

4

And now they were going to be Julia's children.

Julia would teach them—alone there in the room with them, filling the room for them—in her own way. . . .

There would be no more talk about general ideas. . . .

She would have to keep on the "object" lessons, because the Pernes had been so pleased with the idea and the children had liked them. There would still be those moments, with balls for the solar system and a candle for the sun, and the blinds down. But there would not be anything like that instant when all the eyes round the table did nothing but watch the movement of a shadow on a ball . . . the relief afterwards, the happiness and the moment of intense love in the room—never to be forgotten, all of them knowing each other, all their differences gone away, even the clever watchful eyes of the cheating little Jewess, real and unconscious for a moment. Julia would be watching the children as much as the shadow,

PILGRIMAGE

and the children would never quite forget Julia. She would get to know a great deal about the children, but there would be no reverence for big cold outside things. She would teach them to be kind. "Little dorlings." She thought all children were darlings and talked to them all in her tweedling, coaxing, adoring way. If one or two were not, it was the fault of the way they were treated, something in the 'English' way of dealing with them. Nearly all the elder girls she disapproved of, they were no longer children—they were English. She was full of contempt and indignant laughter for them, and of pity for the 'wee things' who were growing up. Yet she got on with them all and had the secret of managing them without letting them see her feelings.

There *was* something specially bad in the English way of bringing up children. Not the 'education' exactly, but something else, something in the way they were treated. Something in the way they were brought up made Englishwomen so awful—with their smiles. Julia did not smile or smirk. She laughed a great deal, often to tears. And she would often suddenly beam. It was like a light coming from under her thick white skin. Was Julia the answer to the awfulness of English-

BACKWATER

women? If, as Julia said, the children were all right and only the girls and grown-ups awful, it must be something in the way the children were treated.

5

Yet Julia was not impersonal.

Miss Deborah, . . . teaching the whole school to be 'good' in the Fairchild way; with her beautiful quivering nodding black head held high—blinking, and not looking at the girls separately—in a grave voice, full of Scripture history, but broken all the time, quivering with laughter and shoutings which she never uttered . . . hilarious, . . . she taught a system of things she had been brought up in. But all the same, she rushed along sweeping the girls with her . . . and the girls believed her. If I taught her system I should have false lips and the girls would not believe me. If ever anyone had the courage to tell her of any dreadful thing, she would weep it all away; and the person would begin all over again certainly, as much as possible in the Fairchild way . . . again and again until they died. Supposing a murderer came and sat down in the hall? Supposing Miss Deborah had been brought up as a Thug—killing people from behind? . . .

PILGRIMAGE

horrid . . . girls, schools were horrid, bound to be horrid, sly, mean, somehow tricky and poisonous. It was a hopeless problem. The English sentimental way was wrong, the way of English-women with children—it made them grow up with those treacherous smiles.

The scientific and 'æsthetic' way, the way of the Putney school—ah, blessed escape! . . . But it left nearly all the girls untouched.

Julia's sentimental way was better than the English sentimental way; its smiles had tears and laughter too, they were not so hypocritical. But it was wrong. It was the strongest thing though in the Wordsworth House school.

7

Julia was not happy. She dreamed fearful dreams. . . . Why did she speak of them as if they were something that no one in this English world into which she had come would understand? She had her strange nights all to herself there across the landing; either lying awake or sleeping and moaning all the time. The girls in her room slept like rocks and did not know that she moaned. They knew she had nightmares and sometimes cried out and woke them.

BACKWATER

He faileth not and thou art dear." Awful . . .

And then Julia, making the children love her, herself, as a person. They would all love her in time. Even Burra after her first grief would fling herself upon Julia . . . Gertie would not though, ever. Cold, quiet little Gertie, the doctor's daughter. She would make no response however much she were kissed and called a little darling. Gertie even as a child was the English thing that Julia disliked. Julia, with all her success was not the answer to the problem of why Englishwomen were abominable. She felt out so much. "Julia, you know, I think things are more important than people. Much more. People, if you let them for one single instant, grin and pounce upon you and try to make you forget things. But they're there all the time and you have to go back to them," and Julia laughing suddenly aloud, "Ah—you're a duck—a tonic." And everyone was a little afraid of Julia, the children, the boarders whom she managed so high-handedly with her laughter, even the Pernes.

6

Perhaps Julia's 'personal' way and the English 'personal' way were somehow both wrong and

PILGRIMAGE

horrid . . . girls, schools were horrid, bound to be horrid, sly, mean, somehow tricky and poisonous. It was a hopeless problem. The English sentimental way was wrong, the way of English-women with children—it made them grow up with those treacherous smiles.

The scientific and 'æsthetic' way, the way of the Putney school—ah, blessed escape! . . . But it left nearly all the girls untouched.

Julia's sentimental way was better than the English sentimental way; its smiles had tears and laughter too, they were not so hypocritical. But it was wrong. It was the strongest thing though in the Wordsworth House school.

7

Julia was not happy. She dreamed fearful dreams. . . . Why did she speak of them as if they were something that no one in this English world into which she had come would understand? She had her strange nights all to herself there across the landing; either lying awake or sleeping and moaning all the time. The girls in her room slept like rocks and did not know that she moaned. They knew she had nightmares and sometimes cried out and woke them.

BACKWATER

But passing the open door late at night one could hear her moaning softly on every breath with closed lips. That was Julia, her life, all laid bare, moaning. . . . She knows she is alive and that there is no escape from being alive. But it has never made her feel breathless with joy. She laughs all day, at everybody and everything, and at night when she is naked and alone she moans; moan, moan, moan, heart-broken; wind and rain alone in the dark in a great open space.

She sometimes hinted at things, those real unknown things that were her own life unshared by anybody; in a low soft terrible broken voice, with eyes dilated and quivering lips; quite suddenly, with hardly any words. And she would speak passionately about the sea, how she hated it and could not look at it or listen to it; and of woods, the horror of woods, the trees and the shadowiness, making her crisp her hands—ah yes, *les mains crispées*, that was the word; and she had laughed when it was explained to her.

It was not that she had troubles at home. Those things she seemed to find odd and amusing, like a story of the life of some other person—poverty and one of her sisters 'very peculiar,'

PILGRIMAGE

another engaged to a scamp and another going to be a shop-assistant, and two more, 'doties' very young, being brought up in the country with an aunt. Everything that happened to people and all the things people did seemed to her funny and amusing, "tickled her to death." Harriett's engagement amused her really, though she pretended to be immensely interested and asked numbers of questions in a rich deep awe-struck voice . . . blarney. . . . But she wanted to hear everything, and she never forgot anything she was told. And she had been splendid about the operation—really anxious, quite conscious and awake across the landing that awful night and really making you feel she was glad afterwards. "Poor Mrs. Henderson—I was never so glad in my life"—and always seeming to know her without having her explained. She was real there, and so strange in telling the Pernes about it and making it all easy.

8

Miriam leaned upon Julia more and more as the term went on, hating and fearing her for her secret sorrow and wondering and wondering why she appeared to have such a curious admiration

BACK WATER

and respect for herself. She could understand her adoration for the Pernes; she saw them as they were and had a phrase which partly explained them, "no more knowledge of the world than babes"—but what was it in herself that Julia seemed so fiercely and shyly to admire?

She knew she could not let Julia know how she enjoyed washing her hands, in several soapings, in the cold water, before dinner. They would go their favourite midday walk, down the long avenue in the park through the little windings of the shrubbery and into the chrysanthemum show, strolling about in the large green-house, all the girls glad of the escape from a set walk, reading over every day the strange names on the little wooden stakes, jokes and gigglings and tiresomenesses all kept within bounds by the happiness that there was, inside the great quiet steamy glass-house, in the strange raw bitter scent of the great flowers, in the strange huge way they stood, and with all their differences of shape and colour staring quietly at you, all in the same way with one expression. They were startling, amongst their grey leaves; and they looked startled and held their heads as if they knew they were beautiful. The girls always hurried to get to the

PILGRIMAGE

chrysanthemums and came away all of them walking in twos relieved and happy back through the cold park to dinner. But Julia, who loved the flowers, though she made fun of their names in certain moods and dropped them *sotto voce* into the general conversation at the dinner-table, would have, Miriam felt sure, scorned her own feeling of satisfaction in the great hand-washing and the good dinner. And she detested pease pudding with the meat, and boiled suet pudding with treacle.

9

She ate scarcely anything herself, keeping her attention free and always seeming to be waiting for someone to say something that was never said. Her broad-shouldered, curiously buoyant, heavy, lounging, ill-clad form, her thick white skin, her eyes like a grey-blue sea, her dark masses of fine hair had long been for Miriam the deepest nook in the meal-time gatherings—she rested there unafraid of anything the boarders might say or do. She would never be implicated. Julia would take care of that, heading everything off and melting up the difficulties into some absurdity that would set all the Pernes talking. Julia lounged easily

BACKWATER

there, controlling the atmosphere of the table. And the Pernes knew it unconsciously, they must know it; any English person would know it . . . though they talked about her untidiness and lack of purpose and application. Julia was a deep, deep nook, full of thorns.

10

Julia had spoiled the news of Sarah's engagement to Bennett Brodie. It had been such a wonderful moment. The thick envelope coming at midday in Bennett's hand-writing—such a surprise—asking Miss Perne's permission to read it at the dinner-table—reading the startling sentences in the firm curved hand—'assert my privilege as your prospective brother-in-law by announcing that I'm on the track of a job that I think will suit you down to the ground,' the curious splash, gravy on the cloth as somebody put the great dish on the table, far-away vexation and funny familiar far-away discomfort all round the table, 'no more of this until I've got full particulars on the tapis; but it may, oh Grecian Mariamne, not be without interest to you to hear that that sister of yours does not appear to be altogether averse to taking over the

PILGRIMAGE ,

management of the new house and the new practice and the new practitioner, and that the new practitioner is hereby made anew in a sense that is more of an amazement to him than it doubtless will be to your intuitive personality. That life had such happiness in store for him is not the least of the many surprises that have come his way. He can only hope to prove not unworthy; and so a hearty au revoir from yours affectionately.' . . . Then Bennett would always be there amongst the home things . . . with his strange way of putting things; he would give advice and make suggestions . . . and Sarah's letter . . . a glance at it showing short sentences, things spoken in a low awe-struck voice. . . . 'We had been to an entertainment together. . . . Coming home along the avenue. I was so surprised. He was so quiet and serious and humble.' . . . all the practical things gone away in a moment, leaving only a sound of deep music, . . . mornings and evenings. Sarah alone now, at last, a person, with mornings and evenings and her own reality in everything. No one could touch her or interfere any more. She was standing aside, herself. She would always be Sarah, someone called Sarah. She need never worry

BACKWATER

any more, but go on doing things. . . . And then looking up and finding all the table eagerly watching and saying suddenly to Miss Perne 'another of my sisters is engaged' and everybody, even Trixie and Beadie, excited and interested.

11

The news, the great great news, wonderful Sarah away somewhere in the background with her miracle—telling it out to the table of women was a sort of public announcement that life was moving out on to wider levels. They all knew it, pinned there; and how dear and glad they were, for a moment, making it real, acknowledging by their looks how wonderful it was. Sarah, floating above them all, caught up out of the darkness of everyday life. . . . And then Julia's eyes—veiled for a moment while she politely stirred and curved her lips to a smile—cutting through it all, seeming to say that nothing was really touched or changed. But when the table had turned to jealousy and resentment and it was time to pretend to hide the shaft of light and cease to listen to the music, Julia, cool and steady, covered everything up and made conversation.

PILGRIMAGE

12

And the thought of Julia was always a disturbance in going to tea with the Brooms. Grace Broom was the only girl in the school for whom she had an active aversion. She put one or two questions about them, 'You really like going there?' 'You'll go on seeing them after you leave?' and concluded carelessly 'that's a mystery to me——'

Sitting at tea shut in in the Brooms' little dining-room with the blinds down and the dark red rep curtains drawn and the gas-light and brilliant fire-light shining on the brilliantly polished davenport in the window-space and the thick bevelled glass of the Satsuma-laden mahogany sideboard, the dim cracked oil-painting of Shakespeare above the mantel-shelf, the dark old landscapes round the little walls, the new picture of Queen Victoria leaning on a stick and supported by Hindu servants, receiving a minister, the solid silver tea-service, the fine heavily edged linen table-cover, the gleaming, various, delicately filled dishes, the great bowl of flowers, the heavy, carven, unmoved, age-long dreaming faces of the three women with their living interested eyes,

BACKWATER

she would suddenly, in the midst of a deep, calm undisturbing silence become aware of Julia. Julia would not be impressed by the surroundings, the strange silent deeps of the room. She would discover only that she was with people who revered "our Queen" and despised "the working classes." It would be no satisfaction to her to sit drinking from very exquisite old china, cup after cup of delicious very hot tea, laughing to tears over the story of the curate who knelt insecurely on a high kneeling stool at evening service in a country church and crashing suddenly down in the middle of a long prayer went on quietly intoning from the floor, or the madeira cake that leapt from the cake-dish on an at-home day and rolled under the sofa. She would laugh, but she would look from face to face, privately, and wonder. She would not really like the three rather dignified seated forms with the brilliant, tear-filled eyes, sitting on over tea, telling anecdotes, and tales of long strange illnesses suffered by strange hidden people in quiet houses, weddings, deaths, the stories of families separated for life by quarrels over money, stories of far-off holidays in the country; strange sloping rooms and farm-house adventures; the cow that walked

PILGRIMAGE .

into the bank in a little country town. . . . Mrs. Philips' first vision, as a bride, of the English Lakes, the tone of her voice as she talked about all these things.

The getting together and sitting about and laughing in the little room would never be to her like being in a world that was independent of all the other worlds. She would not want to go again and again and sit, just the four women, at tea, talking. The silent, beautifully kept, experienced old furniture all over the house would not fill her with fear and delight and strength. It would be no satisfaction to her to put on her things in front of the huge plate glass of the enormous double-fronted wardrobe in the spare-room with its old Bruges ware and its faded photographs of the interiors of unknown churches, rows and rows of seats and a faded blur where the altar was, thorn-crowned heads and bold scrolly texts embroidered in crimson and gold silken mounted and oak-framed. And when she went home alone along the quiet, dark, narrow, tree-filled little roadways she would not feel gay and strong and full of personality.

BACKWATER

13

On prize-giving day, Miriam's last day, Julia seemed to disappear. For the first time since she had come to the school it was as if she were not there. She was neither talking nor watching nor steering anything at all. Again and again during the ceremonies Miriam looked at her sitting or moving about, pale and plain and shabby, one of the crowd of girls.

The curious power of the collected girls, their steady profiles, their movements, their unconcerned security rose and flooded round Miriam as it had done when she first came to the school. But she no longer feared it. It was going on, harsh and unconscious and determined, next term. She was glad of it; the certainty thrilled her; she wanted to convey some of her gladness to Julia, but could not catch her eye.

Her gladness carried her through the most tedious part of the day's performances, the sitting in a listening concourse, doors open, in the school-room, while some ten of the girls went one by one with stricken faces into the little drawing-room and played the piece they had learned during the term. Their shame and confusion, the anger

PILGRIMAGE

and desperation of their efforts, the comments of the listeners and their violent ironic applause roused her to an intensity of sympathy. How they despised the shame-faced tinkling; how they admired the martyrs.

Their strong indifference seemed to centre in the cold pale scornful face of Jessie Wheeler, sitting squarely there with defiant eyes, waiting for the future; the little troop of children she dreamed of.

These North London girls would be scornful mocking fiancées. They would be adored by their husbands. Secretly they would forget their husbands in their houses and children and friends.

14

Julia was the last player. She sidled swiftly out of the room; even her habitual easy halting lounge seemed to have deserted her; and almost once, slow and tragic and resignedly weeping came the opening notes of Chopin's Funeral March. Sitting in the front row of the little batch of children from the lower school who faced the room from the window bay, Miriam saw, in fancy, Julia's face as she sat at the draw-

BACKWATER

ing-room piano—the face she had when she talked of the woods and the sea. The whole of the long march, including the major passage, was the voice of Julia's strange desolation. She played painfully, very slowly and carefully, with tender respectful attention, almost without emphasis. She was not in the least panic-stricken; anyone could feel that; but she had none of the musical assurance that would have filled the girls with uneasy admiration and disgust. They were pleased and amused. And far away, Julia was alone with life and death. She made two worlds plain, the scornful world of the girls and her own shadow-filled life.

Miriam longed for the performance to be at an end so that the girls might reassert themselves.

15

An important stirring was going on at the little table where Miss Cramp sat with the Pernes; only their heads and shoulders showing above the piles of prize-books. Miss Perne stood up and faced the room smiling and gently muttering. Presently her voice grew clear and she was making little statements and pronouncing names, clearly and with gay tender emphasis, the names of tall

PILGRIMAGE

bold girls in the first class. One by one they struggled to the table and stood gentle and disturbed with flushed enlightened faces. Not a single girl could stand unconcerned before Miss Perne. Even Polly Allen's brow was shorn of its boldness.

The girls knew. They would remember something of what the Pernes had tried to give them.

The room was unbearably stuffy. The prize-giving was at an end. Miriam's own children had struggled to the table and come back to her for the last time.

Miss Perne was making a little speech . . . about Miss Henderson's forthcoming departure. Why did people do these formal things? She would be expected to make some response. For a moment she had the impulse to get up and rush away through the hall, get upstairs and pack and send for a four-wheeler. But from behind came hands dragging at a fold of her dress and the sound of Burra's hard sobbing. She felt the child's head bowed against her hip. A child at her side twisted its hands together and sat with its head held high, drawing sharp breaths. Miss Perne's voice went on. She was holding up an

BACKWATER

umbrella, a terrible, expensive, silver-mounted one. The girls had subscribed.

Miriam sat with beating heart waiting for Miss Perne's voice to cease, pressing back towards the support of Burra and other little outstretched clutchings and the general snuffling of her class, grappling with the amazement of hearing from various quarters of the room violent and repeated nose-blowings, and away near the door in the voice of a girl she had hardly spoken to a deep heavy contralto sobbing.

Presently she was on her feet with the tightly-rolled silken twist of the umbrella heavy in her hands. Her stiff lips murmured incoherent thanks in a strange thin voice—Harriett's voice with the life gone from it.

NOTE.—*The next instalment of this book is called
"Honeycomb"*

